

Cultural Limits of Ethical Standards: Written Consent as an Obstacle for Research in Non-European Cultures

Conference: Security Challenges in an Evolving World
Panel: Researching (In)security and Violence:
Diffusion in Methodology

Author: Susan Hoppert-Flämig
PhD Candidate
Department of Peace Studies
University of Bradford, UK

Structure of Presentation

- British research ethics vs. “fieldwork reality”
- High and low context cultures: communication in the UK and El Salvador
- Conclusion



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Ethical Guidelines are Culture-specific

Researcher

Confidentiality
Anonymity
Harms and risks
Informed consent

Participants

Sources: British and European Institutions such as the Social Research Association, Economic and Social Research Council, British Sociological Association, European Code for Socio-economic Research

What happens when data collection takes place **outside the UK/Europe?**

Obtaining Informed Consent

Home institution:

- Principle
- Practice
- Rationale

Fieldwork experience:

- Participants became hesitant
- Irritation
- Signing a consent form is not considered a protection mechanism



Divergence between requirement to obtain approval and “fieldwork reality”

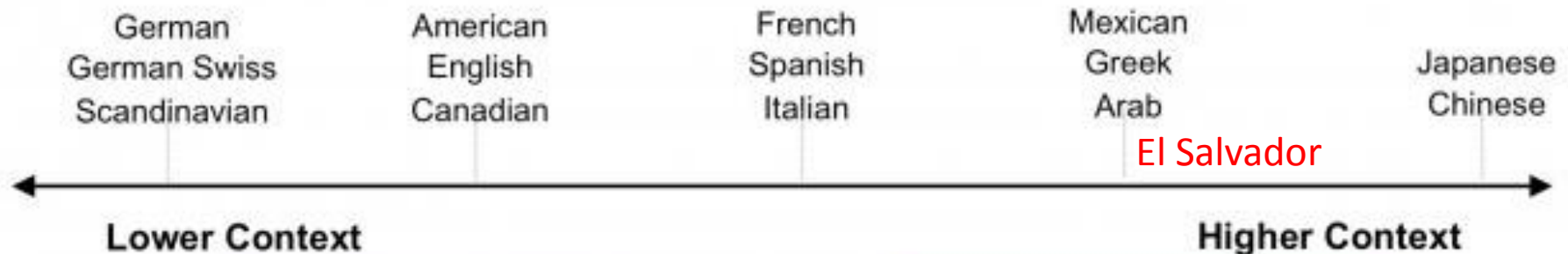
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Communication in High and Low Context Cultures

(Hall 1976, Copeland and Griggs 1986)



Low Context
Communication:

- Specific
- Detailed
- Precise

Poorer at decoding:

- Unspoken message
- Body language

High Context
Communication:

- Less direct

Emphasis on:

- Human relations

More sensitivity to:

- Non-verbals
- Feelings of others

Source: workingvoices.com.

Communication in High and Low Context Cultures (II)

Low context (UK)

Rule-based (Hooker 2003)

- Rules work because they are spelled out
- Signing a consent form can function as a protection mechanism

High context (El Salvador)

Relationship-based

- Sharing information is more successful within a personal relationship
- Asking for signed consent ignores the rules of communication

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Developing Culturally Sensitive Research Ethics

- Ethics committees need to revise standards towards a better inclusion of other cultures
- Inquire research practices of academic institutions of the fieldwork culture
- Intercultural training for researchers and ethics committees

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION!

Contact:

s.flamig@bradford.ac.uk

<http://bradford.academia.edu/SusanHoppertFlaemig>

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