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On the Ethics of Researching Informal Urbanism

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Abstract

Forms of informal urbanism, ranging from informal settlement to street vending and informal transport, have become integral to how places work across different contexts and scales. In this article, we reflect on the ethics of researching forms of urban informality, with a focus on the capacities and challenges associated with exploring informal urbanism, particularly in the context of what is considered the global South. By drawing on our experiences of investigating various forms of informality in different contexts, this article engages with ethical considerations that arise when researching informal urbanism. We argue that designing, conducting, and disseminating research on forms of urban informality can pose critical ethical questions for researchers who not only strive to bring about positive change but must also exercise caution to avoid causing more harm than good by exposing individuals at risk of exploitation, eviction, or displacement.

Keywords: Urban Informality; Urbanism; Informal Settlement; Street Vending; Informal Transport; Street Trading; Informal Urbanism; Ethics; Research Design; Research Methods

1. Introduction

Forms of informal urbanism — ranging from informal settlement to street vending and informal transport — have largely emerged beyond yet in relation to state control (Dovey, 2012;

Kamalipour, 2022). For many, urban informality works as a critical resource for managing poverty and sustaining livelihoods, particularly in the context of the global South (Dovey, 2013; Kamalipour & Peimani, 2021). For instance, informal settlements generally accommodate those for whom access to affordable housing through the formal market is almost impossible (Huchzermeyer, 2010). Despite accommodating about one billion people globally (UN-HABITAT, 2006), informal settlements often go undocumented and are left off official maps (Dovey & Kamalipour, 2018; Kamalipour & Dovey, 2019; Patel & Baptist, 2012). Similarly, forms of informal street vending and transport contribute significantly to informal economies and mobilities by providing job opportunities for the urban poor and possibly filling the gaps of formal urban developments (Kamalipour, 2022; Kamalipour & Peimani, 2019; Peimani & Dovey, 2018). While there is extensive literature on urban informality (e.g., McFarlane & Waibel, 2012; Roy, 2005; Roy & AlSayyad, 2004) and a growing body of knowledge on different forms of informality, including informal settlements (e.g., Dovey & King, 2011; Kamalipour & Dovey, 2020; Soliman, 2002; Wekesa, Steyn, & Otieno, 2011), informal street vending (e.g., Falla & Valencia, 2019; Lindell, Ampaire, & Byerley, 2019; Omoegun, Mackie, & Brown, 2019; Peimani & Kamalipour, 2022a), and informal transport (e.g., Akaateba, Akanbang, & Yakubu, 2022; Cervero & Golub, 2007; Peimani & Dovey, 2018; Turner & H anh, 2019), the ethics of undertaking research on informal urbanism have remained underexplored. In this article, we begin from the view that while researching informal urbanism is particularly significant, there are some key ethical challenges that we need to engage with throughout the process.

Drawing on our experiences of exploring forms of informality in Southeast Asia, South Asia, Middle East, and South America, we discuss the ethical considerations associated with researching informal urbanism. This is particularly at stake as forms of informality have largely remained invisible, underexplored, and/or overlooked (Kamalipour & Dovey, 2019; Kamalipour & Peimani, 2019). We argue that designing, undertaking, and disseminating research on forms of informal urbanism requires careful consideration of ethical issues, particularly for researchers who strive for positive

change while being mindful of the potential harm caused by exposing vulnerable communities to exploitation, eviction, or displacement.

As Lunn (2014b) points out, ethical considerations are integral to the whole process of designing and conducting research. In response to some of the current shortcomings of the ethics processes, Hammett, Jackson, and Bramley (2022) call for a move towards a more dynamic and responsive process of research ethics, which can effectively encourage meaningful engagement and reflection. Elsewhere, Hammett, Twyman, and Graham (2014) provide insights on ethics, among others, in the context of development research. Lunn (2014a) also provides a reflective collection, discussing ethical challenges associated with undertaking fieldwork in the context of the global South. In this article, we begin with a brief reflection on institutional ethics review, and then discuss ethical considerations related to research design, fieldwork, and dissemination. Designing research on informal urbanism can present ethical dilemmas, as some institutional ethical review procedures and risk assessments may inadvertently discourage the investigation of certain topics or exploration of challenging urban environments. Undertaking fieldwork on informal urbanism brings to light a range of ethical considerations, given the prevalent stigmatisation and conflation of informality with poverty, illegality, and crime. The dissemination of research findings can also pose ethical challenges as it raises critical questions about how and by whom the study outcomes will be used, as well as the extent to which the research findings will be impactful and for whom.

2. On Institutional Ethics Review

Although the institutional procedures of risk assessment and ethical review are useful in preparing field researchers for good practice and predicting potential situations, they can pose ethical concerns. These procedures may inadvertently discourage researchers from selecting challenging topics, questions, and case studies, particularly those from the global South. Institutional approaches to research ethics have been criticised for their idealised nature and detachment from the realities of field research (Lunn, 2014b). The ethics review process tends to adopt the assumed standards of

quantitative research as the norm (Van den Hoonaard, 2002b), and the research governance systems seem to be designed primarily based on an assumption that almost everything can be known and predicted in advance (McAreavey & Muir, 2011, p. 398). This is particularly challenging when it comes to qualitative research in which the research problem is by and large emergent (Tolich & Fitzgerald, 2006). The requirement of “knowing in advance” can be particularly problematic in qualitative research (O’Neill, 2002). The research problems, possible outcomes, and ethical considerations may not be fully known to ethics applicants before the commencement of research.

Investigating certain challenging topics may also be constrained by institutional procedures for ethical review and risk assessment, as noted by Brooks (2014). Research projects that focus on urban informality or explore challenging urban environments that host a range of informal activities may be implicitly discouraged due to the constraints of these procedures. Consequently, researchers may often find themselves spending a significant amount of time and effort completing paperwork and related procedures instead of engaging with their research. Likewise, there can be a challenge in justifying the choice of multiple case studies from different places within the context of what is commonly referred to as the global South. This is associated with the fact that each of these contexts may have been described differently in terms of the hazards and risks they present. As a result, researchers are typically required to document their actions and develop a contingency plan as part of their risk assessment process. It is also important to recognise that research institutions may have varying approaches to research ethics and related procedures across different contexts. Disparities in this area may be particularly pronounced between research institutions based in the global North and those in the global South.

Institutional ethical review procedures typically require researchers to follow specific protocols that may not fully account for the nuanced realities of researching certain topics. For example, researchers must disclose whether their research aims to study or expose any activities that are considered “illegal”. While urban informality can broadly be defined with reference to how it emerges and possibly become consolidated beyond yet in relation to state control, it is critical to

avoid confusing the relationships between formal and informal with the relationships between legal and illegal. Roy (2015) argues that no legal boundaries can be drawn between the domains of informality and formality. It is also important to avoid assuming a binary distinction between formal and informal that overlooks a range of in-between conditions (Dovey & Kamalipour, 2018; Kamalipour, 2022; Kamalipour & Peimani, 2021). Furthermore, what is considered illegal may vary across different contexts and change over time. Using limited frameworks such as legal/illegal to understand urban informality oversimplifies the complexities of such a multidimensional concept, particularly within the context of institutional processes that may encourage or discourage certain types of research.

One example that highlights the detachment between institutional ethical review forms and the reality of researching certain topics such as urban informality is the issue of obtaining informed consent for observational studies in public spaces. Nevertheless, challenges in obtaining informed consent when undertaking observational studies in public spaces are not merely limited to researching informality. The use of signed consent forms has been a highly contested area in qualitative research (Van den Hoonaard, 2002a). Obtaining written consent can become even more challenging in the context of international field research, particularly when potential participants agree to participate but become suspicious as soon as any required paperwork is mentioned or feel uncomfortable signing (Sharma, 2009). Much research in certain fields, such as urban design, and on specific topics, such as public space, social behaviour, urban life, and forms of informality can be considered observational and often related to environment-behaviour studies. In reality, it is often impractical for a researcher to obtain informed consent from individuals to undertake an observational study in public spaces.

3. On Research Design

Designing research on informal urbanism requires anticipatory planning, which involves both thorough preparation and flexibility. According to Adler and Adler (2002, p. 42), “researchers will

always have to make situational decisions and interpretations about the ethical and safe thing to do.” While researching informal urbanism may involve using a variety of methods, tools, and/or techniques, such as ethnography, survey, remote sensing, and GIS mapping, case study research design holds significant importance in investigating forms of informality. It has been suggested that using multiple case study research designs can provide more robust and convincing evidence than a single case study approach (Yin, 2003). There has also been a call to consider all cities as “ordinary” (Robinson, 2006) and emerging thinking about how it can be done through comparative urban research (Robinson, 2022). Nonetheless, selecting multiple case studies can pose ethical challenges, particularly when deciding which case studies to include or exclude. While the availability of base data and the possibility of access to fieldwork are often among the key considerations in the process of case study selection, a critical challenge faced by studies of urban informality is the lack of accurate and up-to-date data, as forms of informality have largely remained invisible and/or undocumented. Thus, deciding which aspects and case studies to include/exclude can create ethical dilemmas, and many critical but poorly documented case studies are likely to be omitted from the list of potential case studies for consideration. Excluding undocumented case studies could perpetuate a vicious cycle of leaving the undocumented behind, regardless of their potential contributions to addressing gaps in the literature on urban informality. As a result, research outcomes could become geographically limited to previously documented case studies, reproducing data richness while leaving undocumented case studies underexplored.

Selecting appropriate research methods is crucial when studying informal urbanism, as it can present ethical challenges. Thinking about the applicability of the chosen research methods during intensive fieldworks is as important as their capacity to address the pertinent research questions. Conducting pilot studies can aid in preparing researchers for fieldwork and developing their skills. However, in certain case studies or contexts, access to a pilot study may not be economically viable or geographically possible. To prevent any potential harm to both the research team and the relevant communities during fieldwork, it is important to carefully examine the applicability of the selected

research methods prior to commencing fieldwork. This can be achieved by seeking advice from experts who have conducted similar research in comparable contexts. In environment-behaviour and public life studies, observing “physical traces” and reading “clues” can be quite valuable (Zeisel, 2006). Unlike methods that rely on self-reporting, unobtrusive observation of physical traces does not have the issue of reactivity, whereby individuals engaged in informal activities in public spaces may alter their behaviour or performance due to the awareness of being observed. The use of unobtrusive methods as alternative data sources to cross-check study findings on specific topics has the advantage of enabling researchers to collect data without causing intrusion or disturbance, as noted by Payne and Payne (2004). However, it is important to acknowledge that unobtrusive or nonparticipant observation can raise ethical concerns regarding the observation of individuals who are unaware of being observed. The lack of publicly accessible and reliable data on the global South cases often increases the importance of nonparticipant direct observation as a primary diagnostic and analytical tool (Kamalipour, 2023; Peimani & Kamalipour, 2022b). As it is not generally possible for researchers to ask questions to confirm their interpretations, it is crucial to ensure a systematic, consistent, and objective recording of related data, and report relevant findings in an aggregated way to protect the privacy of individuals (Angrosino, 2004). Using visual recording as a supplementary method in parallel with nonparticipant direct observation can be particularly useful when observing everything by a solo researcher over a short period of time is almost impossible. Such supplementary methods are found to be helpful in allowing the researcher to delve into further details in due course (Gehl & Svarre, 2013). Visual recording, including photography, time-lapse recording, video sequences, and filming, has been a commonly used method in the field of public life studies (e.g., Gehl & Svarre, 2013; Whyte, 1980). Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognise that visual recording can also give rise to significant ethical concerns, particularly regarding the recording of individuals in public space who are not aware of being recorded.

The capacity of urban mapping as a form of spatial knowledge production can be harnessed in research on forms of informal urbanism, as it can unravel how different places work (Dovey &

Kamalipour, 2018; Kamalipour & Dovey, 2018; Peimani & Kamalipour, 2022b). As a key method, urban mapping can unfold capacities, unseen realities, and potentials (Corner, 1999). Mapping the spatiality of informal urbanism is particularly important, as it pertains to the capacity of research to bring visibility and impact as a form of activism that resists ignorance and neglect. This increased visibility can potentially empower communities to resist, hold authorities accountable, and contest repressive practices associated with the state and its functionaries. However, unintended consequences can arise from the dissemination of research, and researchers cannot fully predict or control them. While producing and updating spatial data in collaboration with the related communities can play an important role in developing more equitable and appropriate responses to meet the needs and desires of residents, ethical questions may arise regarding the potential consequences of urban mapping, such as boundary disputes and legality concerns, among others.

4. On Fieldwork

Undertaking fieldwork across multiple case studies can be quite challenging, as the reality of working in certain urban environments, such as more congested and less formal cities of the global South, is often complex and unpredictable. Learning from each case study can pave the way for a more effective exploration of the other case studies. Incorporating a degree of flexibility in research design and considering supplementary research methods can be particularly helpful during fieldwork to avoid any potential harm to the related communities and researchers. In challenging urban environments, such as informal settlements, field researchers need to be thoroughly prepared, continuously assess potential risks, and take appropriate preventive measures to mitigate them during the course of their fieldwork.

Informal settlements and places with the predominance of informal activities are typically associated with negative symbolic capital and forms of socio-spatial exclusion and stigmatisation. A key challenge is gaining access to the field and negotiating the position of the field researcher in exploring these urban environments. Payne and Payne (2004) point out that fieldwork preparation is

not merely intellectual, and limitations regarding access can become a major research constraint. Many people involved in informal activities conduct their business and live their lives under constant fear of eviction, demolition, or displacement. Therefore, any outsider's presence is immediately noticed and may be perceived as associated with the official authorities. It is often a challenge for field researchers to nurture trust and justify their role as being neither connected to the state nor involved in decision making processes that only serve the interests of the authorities. As Dhananka (2017) points out, the role of researchers may also be seen quite differently depending on the experiences of the related communities in relation to aid delivery. Non-verbal differences, such as clothing and appearance, can also be noticeable and influence individual's attitude, behaviour, and bodily representation. Upon entering the territory of an informal settlement, the presence of field researchers is immediately noticed, and the locals will likely scrutinise the researchers as outsiders. Local contacts play a critical role in enabling or constraining access to the community and negotiating the field researcher's role.

Data collection in the process of researching informal urbanism is particularly at stake, as it often involves documenting a range of activities that may be considered "illegal". For example, in the case of squatter settlements, even documenting the built environment can become problematic due to certain practices of informal construction being deemed "illegal" in some contexts. It is important to note that with any form of documentation comes a degree of visibility, which can create ethical dilemmas. For one thing, visibility can bring legitimacy, particularly where most informal settlements and individuals involved in informal activities in public spaces are likely to remain overlooked and/or unrecognised. In this sense, bringing visibility through documentation can challenge the politics of ignoring that forms of urban informality are here to stay and cannot be simply wished away. For another, documentation may also be used as evidence of practices that are considered "illegal" in certain contexts. This may challenge the tolerance of the state as the visibility of certain forms of informality is not often congruent with the desire of the state to project a constructed image of an "orderly city" through forms of control, regulation, and surveillance.

Expert interviews can be conducted as a primary research method to collect data on certain issues such as upgrading and governance, as well as a secondary method to supplement direct observation and visual recordings. While formal interviews with experts can be useful, informal interviews with local contacts and systematic documentation of clues and physical traces of change can potentially be more informative. Although interviews can be recorded using available technologies to address possible issues regarding credibility and trustworthiness of research findings, the data quality can be compromised by using such technologies during fieldwork when participants need to be particularly cautious about what they communicate (Ntseane, 2009). Certain projects of urban development include interrelated processes of decision making and implementation that typically involve a broad range of experts and professions. The use of expert interview as a data collection method can pose a risk of placing the interviewer in the position of an evaluator. This, in turn, can create a conflict of interest for interviewees in relation to their roles as both interviewees and experts involved in the related urban development projects. This conflict becomes specifically problematic when direct observations of the case studies do not align with the expert interviews, raising significant ethical concerns about the validity and reliability of the information provided by interviewees. These concerns are particularly relevant in the absence of direct observation and other supplementary methods.

5. On Dissemination

Ensuring widespread dissemination of research findings is critical for enhancing visibility, communicating outcomes, and promoting engagement and impact. It is important to address the underlying processes that have led to the concentration of poverty and socio-spatial segregation in urban environments, rather than simply romanticising urban informality as entrepreneurial or heroic forms of practice that take place outside of state control. Research on informal urbanism also runs the risk of conflating urban informality with poverty. In this case, using images of urban poverty to communicate research on forms of urban informality raises ethical concerns. If individuals involved in

informal activities are considered vulnerable, using photos that reveal their identities in related publications is ethically problematic. Barrett (2004) reflects on how including photos of stigmatised people can be problematic even if written permission is obtained, as individuals may feel quite differently over time regarding the publication of such photos. Researchers are required to be ethically vigilant and follow ethical guidelines to protect the identities of participants. Using photos of individuals from related communities to construct images of seemingly engaged and impactful research raises substantial ethical concerns.

One of the ethical challenges of dissemination is about the ways in which the outcomes of research can most effectively become a part of public knowledge. While open access can enable more inclusive communication of research to a broad range of audiences, it is important to note that not all researchers across the globe have the resources necessary to publish open access. Publishing open access is particularly important when it comes to research on informal urbanism, as most potential audiences for research on forms of informality (e.g., the general public, local authorities, governmental organisations, built environment practitioners, and NGOs) may not have access to research outputs that are not published open access. Even some academics affiliated with universities in the global South may not have sufficient institutional access to research publications, unlike their counterparts affiliated with universities in the global North. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge pre-existing inequalities in dissemination and strive towards inclusive access to research on informal urbanism. The task for researchers is to identify their primary audiences and explore the most effective and appropriate ways to make their research outputs accessible to them.

In the context of informal urbanism, visibility primarily pertains to the ways in which and the extent to which forms of informality are being revealed and concealed (Kamalipour & Dovey, 2019; Kamalipour & Peimani, 2019). Regardless of the extent to which forms of informality have become (in)visible, many are likely to remain undocumented, as if they are only temporary. However, forms of informal urbanism are here to stay. With research, comes a degree of visibility, which is critical for recognising and appropriately addressing forms of urban informality. Research has the capacity to not

only produce and develop knowledge but also to inform policy and practice. Nevertheless, bringing visibility to the spaces of exclusion can be used for and against relevant communities by enabling them to stay put and sustain their livelihoods or misused by authorities. Mishra (2019) points to how the possibilities revealed through certain forms of mapping can be appropriated by various stakeholders, such as the state, politicians, land brokers, and/or real estate developers. There is no easy way out of the ethical dilemma of visibility. The challenge for researchers would be to approach mapping with a critical and ethical lens, and to ask questions about the implications of rendering urban informality visible for those involved in informal activities, ranging from settlement to street vending and transport.

While undertaking participatory action research can be promising as it tends to actively involve the researched communities, there is, as Stratton (2002, p. 135) points out, “an ethical, and possibly irresolvable, dilemma involved in raising consciousness and expectations for transformative outcomes.” Giving back, as Hammett, Jackson, and Vickers (2019) argue, has to be appropriate in relation to both the local context and the related research. It is also important to acknowledge the complexities associated with multiple factors involved that cannot be simply identified and controlled, and to avoid assuming simplistic causal relationships between the related interventions and the subsequent outcomes. As Payne and Payne (2004) argue, merely because something occurs following an intervention, it cannot necessarily be assumed that the intervention caused it. When disseminating findings, it is crucial to consider the ethical implications and potential consequences and tailor the approach to best serve the studied communities.

The disparities between the global North and South become particularly significant when it comes to research. Shamim and Qureshi (2013, p. 478) recommend that ethics clearance should become compulsory across institutions in the global South since “research ethics is still not practised in many institutions in the South.” Importing research ethics from the global North to the global South can also be problematic (Israel, 2018). While it is important to enable inclusive approaches to research dissemination in a global context, this is particularly concerning when it comes to

disseminating research conducted in institutions that may not have established research ethics governance. Exploring the role of funders and publishers in addressing disparities associated with the underregulation and overregulation of research ethics across different contexts and institutions remains a task for future research.

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