

Ethical dilemmas in a socio-demographic study of male involvement in domestic violence in Mexico

Juan Manuel Contreras
Independent Consultant

Background

The human interaction is the origin of real life situations that implicate moral questions that have their ultimate enquiry in what it is right or wrong. How individuals respond to particular moral problems is influenced by the internalisation of the moral values established in their society. However, it is clear that individuals under the same society could have different moral beliefs and conduct and, therefore, react differently to a similar moral dilemma. Ethics is the scientific discipline that helps to analyse, explore and understand the moral issues. This philosophical field could be understood as a system of moral values that provides standards of conduct; in other words, ethics is a universal approach for the understanding of moral problems.

Philosophers are usually in charge of the theoretical aspects of this discipline. Instead, the application of ethics to real life situations could be undertaken by individuals from different disciplines, including social and health sciences. A particular case of applied ethics is related to the conduction of research involving human beings. According to Jesani *et al.* “all scientific activities, including those by the social scientists, are conducted with the participation of human beings or have an impact on human beings or on the wider society and environment. Therefore, it is essential that researchers understand ethical issues and the implications of their scientific work and act accordingly” (Jesani *et al.*, 2004, p. 1).

Since 1945 different organisations have been concerned about ethical norms for scientific research involving human subjects. The first international instrument on the ethics of research is the Nuremberg Code that was promulgated in 1947 as consequence of the experiments with humans during the Second World War. Since then, different institutions have developed and adopted rules that regulate the research involving humans. One of the most relevant is the Helsinki Declaration, issued by the World Medical Association in 1964 that has influenced several ethical guidelines (WMA, 2004).

It was in 1979 when The Belmont Report was published by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioural Research providing ethical arguments for the laws governing research with individuals. This report establishes the three ethical principles that are fundamental for research:

- a) The principle of respect. Research must respect and protect the rights, dignity and autonomy of participants.
- b) The principle of beneficence. Research must make positive contributions towards the welfare of individuals. It must maximise benefits and minimise possible harms, i.e., research must not cause any kind of harm to the participants and to people in general.
- c) The principle of justice. Research must treat individuals fairly, the benefits and risks of research must be fairly distributed among people, and subjects must be equitably chosen to ensure that certain groups are not systematically selected for excluded from research.

As mentioned above, these principles have been used as the main ethical guidelines for research with human beings. Ethical issues become particularly crucial in the case of research on sensitive topics. This type of research presents difficult issues because the potential costs to those involved in the research, including the participants, their communities and also the researchers and fieldworkers (Lee, 1993).

This is the case of research on domestic violence. For this reason Watts, C., Heise, L., Ellsberg, M. and García-Moreno, C. developed specific ethical guidelines for domestic violence research that can be consulted in WHO (2001), p.11:

- a) The safety of respondents and the research team is paramount, and should guide all project decisions.
- b) Prevalence studies need to be methodologically sound and to build upon current research experience about how to minimise the under-reporting of violence.
- c) Protecting confidentiality is essential to ensure both women's safety and data quality.
- d) All research team members should be carefully selected and receive specialised training and on-going support.
- e) The study design must include actions aimed at reducing any possible distress caused to the participants by the research.
- f) Fieldworkers should be trained to refer individuals requesting assistance to available local services and sources of support. Where few resources exist, it may be necessary for the study to create short-term support mechanisms.
- g) Researchers and donors have an ethical obligation to help ensure that their findings are properly interpreted and used to advance policy and intervention development.
- h) Violence questions should only be incorporated into surveys designed for other purposes when ethical and methodological requirements can be met.

This is an example of the concern of social scientists to respond to practical situations presented during the conduction of research, considering an ethical approach. The ethical standards, based on philosophical theory and already validated, must be applied to the

conduction of research. Particularly, any research involving human beings must give special attention to the ethical norms established by the Belmont Report. Also, it is paramount that all research on domestic violence follows the guidelines elaborated by the WHO.

In this paper it is shown how ethical issues were considered in a research of male perpetrators of intimate partner violence in Mexico. Special attention was given to ethical considerations established by The Belmont Report and the Ethical Guidelines for domestic violence research developed by the WHO. Particular important is the discussion of the ethical problems of practical situations that were presented during the research. For example, a main issue was related to the applications of international research ethics standards to a research in a particular cultural context. Another one was about the conciliation between the motivation for conducting research seeking the benefit of the society versus the respect of the population of study who were aggressors of domestic violence. At the end some lessons learned for ethical issues in research of sensitive topics are presented.

Nature of the research

The primary question of the study was: what are the processes which lead Mexican men living in heterosexual unions to become involved in physical violence against their female partners? Specifically, this study analysed, from a socio-demographic perspective, the role of different factors associated with domestic violence, the pathways through which these factors operate, and the settings, the contexts and the specific circumstances in which violence occurs. The ultimate purpose was to contribute to the abolition of domestic violence, by providing recommendations for the development of appropriate intervention strategies.

The study used an integrated analysis of quantitative and qualitative data. First, a total of 500 face-to-face interviews were conducted in 2003 with male factory workers aged 20-

40 who had been married or co-habiting for at least one year. The survey was carried out in factories in an urban middle to low income setting in Mexico City. Participants were selected randomly and a high percentage of them (around 90%) agreed to participate in the study. Most of those who refused to participate gave the reason that they were too busy. The factories selected had the following characteristics which are typical of factories in Mexico: a) most of the workers are men; b) the workers are of middle to low socio-economic status; c) most of the workers are of reproductive age. The majority of participants were manual skilled and unskilled workers, but some non-manual workers also took part in the research.

The development, design, and fieldwork of this survey was managed and implemented by myself, as the primary researcher, and with the assistance of others involved in this study. The reasons for obtaining this survey were two fold: a) to obtain specific quantitative information on issues related to domestic violence and b) to aid in selecting participants for the qualitative study.

The qualitative component mainly consisted in the conduction of in-depth interviews. 30 interviews were carried out with men selected from the factory-based survey. 15 participants were selected on their condition of having been recently involved in a violent incident within their current relationship. 15 men never having experienced physical violence with their current partners were also selected. Participant observation was also conducted throughout the entire fieldwork. Qualitative data was used to: a) understand in-depth the contextual factors influencing violent and non-violent behaviour from the social actor's point of view; b) find out in what contexts violence occurs and its meanings for participants; c) examine how particular factors, measured quantitatively, interact and interpret why these patterns exist. The interviews were carried out by me and another fieldworker who was hired for this task.

Ethical issues considered

Following the main ethical issues considered in this research and an explanation of the diverse practical procedures that were used to cope with them.

Security

The principle of beneficence of the Belmont report and the first point of the WHO recommendations highlight the importance of the safety of people involved in research. This includes not just participants, also their families – in this case their female partners and children - and the interviewers. Actually, the main ethical concern related to researching domestic violence is the potential to cause harm (Ellsberg et al., 2002). So, in this case I considered that the issue of security was paramount and the type of location was important to ensure this security. For example, surveys that visit households or telephone surveys are not adequate because they can provoke violent incidents. There is a risk that violent men may think that they are being interviewed because their partners have reported them. In most household visiting surveys, the population of study are women and in most cases it is recommended that they should be alone during the interview to prevent more violence in the house. However, since my interest is to interview men, it would be almost impossible to find them alone without their wife being present at home, and there is a great risk of provoking more violence against the female partner.

So, the fieldwork was conducted at the workplace thus minimising the risk of provoking a violent incident. Respondents were less likely to present aggressive conduct in their workplace against the interviewer. Also, in these places there was security staff that could prevent any inconvenient incident. In addition, workers observed that other peers were interviewed in the same way. This reduced their anxiety that they were interviewed for a particular reason, and thereby minimised the risk of provoking violent incident in their homes. Also, in the case that the interview may provoke high stress in the participant, he has time to become more relaxed before returning home. The attitude and behaviour of

interviewers were also important. To be friendly, patient and possess a non-judgmental attitude helped to minimise distress on the participants.

Privacy, confidentiality, anonymity

The principle of respect of the Belmont Report includes the issue of privacy. Privacy is also a condition of confidentiality recommended by the WHO ethical guidelines. To obtain privacy is often difficult and might require creativity from the researcher. The factories chosen were large locations where both the quantitative interviews and the in-depth interviews were conducted as privately as possible. In most of the cases we were provided by a private office within the factories.

In both phases, quantitative and qualitative, the research team was extremely careful to ensure confidentiality of participants and to reassure them that the study was completely separate from their work. It was essential that men felt certain that their answers would not be accessed by anyone other than the main researcher. We followed some mechanisms to protect the confidentiality of the information collected:

- Only I had access to the information and this has been used only for the purpose of this research.
- All interviewers received strict instructions about the importance of maintaining confidentiality.
- All the material was locked and only I had access to it.
- In presentation of findings, cases are presented without specific detail that may identify the source of the information.
- Each participant was informed of these mechanisms.

Complete anonymity was impossible to obtain. During the quantitative phase we asked for the first name of participants and their job position to identify those selected for the qualitative part. When we returned to the factories to look for those who were chosen for

the qualitative work we were assisted in this search only by the medical doctors of the factories. We did not record any names or other identifying information.

Voluntary and autonomous participation

According to the first point of The Belmont Report, research must respect and protect the rights, dignity and autonomy of participants. This implies that the participation in research of any individual must be voluntary and autonomous. It was emphasised to participants that their participation was voluntary and that they were completely free to stop the conversation at any time for any reason or not to answer the questions. Considerable time was spent explaining to them detailed information about the study, why the investigation was important, and how the information would be used in the future. We encouraged respondents to ask any questions or voice any doubts or concerns before and during the interview and we tried to give appropriate answers to all questions. Participants were advised that some of the topics would be extremely personal and may be difficult to talk about.

All participants were asked for permission to proceed with the interviews. In all cases we tried to obtain this permission without the use of any coercion or inducement or promising unrealistic benefits for the participants. It was emphasised that the study was totally separate of their work. A verbal consent of all participants was obtained prior to initiating any interviews.

Avoid re-traumatisation, misunderstandings and distressful situations

To avoid re-traumatisation, misunderstandings and distressful situations of participants, five main issues were important:

- 1) Appropriate questionnaires were essential to reduce possible distress. We were careful with the language used. The words were appropriate for participants: easy to understand and that they did not result in being judgmental or offensive. The order of questions was of utmost importance, less sensitive questions were asked before more sensitive questions.
- 2) The conduction of a pilot work was useful for becoming familiar with the culture, developing the trust of the participants and for developing appropriate instruments. This activity was essential for understanding how men could feel more comfortable during the interview.
- 3) Interviewers tried that men felt comfortable during their participation. The research team continuously expressed interest in the participants' answers, and the interviews were carried out trying to avoid repetition, to avoid interrupting the participant, to avoid intimidation of the individuals by the questions and to end in a positive manner.
- 4) Temporary assistance was offered to those individuals who presented distress during and after the interview. Also, we took care to remain sensitive to any questions that may cause a negative impact to an individual.
- 5) We asked all participants if they wanted information or/and to be referred to specialised centres. We provided them with a list of services that could respond to their situations.

Minimise under-reporting

According to WHO (2001), it is ethically unacceptable to conduct a study of domestic violence which gives as a result poor quality of data. "Bad data may be worse than no data" (WHO, 2001, p. 15). All the methodological considerations (design of the study, instruments, training and selection of fieldworkers, attitude and behaviour of

interviewers, the conduction of a pilot work and the caring of participants) were focused also on ensure that the findings reflected the “real” situation of the area of study.

Non-exploitation of participants

Particular attention was paid to avoiding the exploitation of workers. First, the criteria for selecting participants were fair, for example, easy accessibility was not a criterion for their selection in research. In this case we included Mexican male workers from middle to low income because they are the most representative group of men in urban settings in Mexico. Second, the information has been only used for research purposes with the aim to benefit the community, i.e., the data were not exploited in any other way. Third, a concerted effort was made to respect each participant’s time and to avoid any undue loss of resources and income. This was a priority mainly during the qualitative phase. This is one of the reasons we preferred to conduct the research after working hours.

Ethical dilemmas

The research methods used and the decisions taken to cope with the ethical issues during the fieldwork arose some ethical dilemmas. Following the main ones are presented.

Informed consent

This research was not introduced as a domestic violence study. We followed the recommendation given by WHO (2001) who establishes that it is a good option to frame the research as a study on health and family relations. The rest of the information was provided to participants; for example, they were advised that some of the topics would be extremely personal and may be difficult to talk about. The reason of this decision was related to the difficulties to carry out research on sensitive topics when the main topic and

the purpose of the study are known. This could have produced important bias on the answers of participants that could have affected the quality of the data obtained. As mentioned before, to produce and present poor data that does not represent the real situation of the studied context could be considered unethical. However, to fulfil this ethical consideration was necessary to “hide” some information to the participants. This decision could be also considered unethical because they are not obtaining all the information to give a real informed consent of their participation. This could be considered “dishonest” from the researchers.

Another situation related to informed consents during this study was that we found it inappropriate to reveal the main reasons why participants were chosen for the qualitative part. To disclose the ‘truth’ may have altered their answers and again it would have gravely affected the quality of the data collected. Also, this could have generated discomfort and anxiety of those who were aggressors that could have provoked violent situations.

With these two situations I would like to highlight the practical difficulties to fulfil ethical guidelines during the conduction of a research in a sensitive topic. For example, an activity carried out to avoid an unethical situation could be affecting another ethical issue. In this case, the question is how to get a real informed consent of participation in a sensitive study ensuring quality of data and safety of the participants and their communities?

Finally, another situation that was faced during this research also related to the informed consent was about the signed consent. The initial plan was to ask the participants for signed consent; however, because a Mexican cultural issue related to anxiety for insecurity, most individuals expressed concern about giving written consent. I decided to respect their wishes. Instead we asked them for explicit verbal agreement to participate in the study. In this case, how can fieldworkers demonstrate to ethical committees that participants had an informed consent of their participation?

Genuine voluntary and autonomy participation

First, during the participant observation phase, we did not inform the workers that we were observing and taking notes about their behaviour. The decision not to inform them was mainly because we did not want to provoke any change of attitude and behaviour of the participants that would affect the quality of the data and also we did not want to cause any distress to observed workers. Should participants have known that we were observing them? Again we faced here the predicament of carrying out activities that could be considered unethical to fulfil ethical considerations.

Another situation related to the voluntary and autonomy participation is that there is usually an unequal power relationship between the researcher and the researched. This could be socio-economic, intellectual or just for the roles played during an interview. That can create a sense of obligation for an individual to agree to participate on a research. Also, participants could have false expectations of individual benefits of the study that encouraged interviewed. Some participants may have agreed to participate because they assumed that this would be positive – or at least not negative - for them in their work or just because they felt obligated to do it. We tried to avoid these situations. In all cases, we tried to have an equal relationship with them and we tried to obtain permission from them to conduct the interview without the use of any direct or indirect coercion or inducement or promising unrealistic benefits for the participants. We also reassure that the study was completely separate from their work. However, despite of our efforts this situation was impossible to avoid.

Respect the principle of confidentiality

The issue of total confidentiality was a priority, even though severe criminal acts such as child abuse, murder, among others were disclosed by the participants. I considered that it would have been unethical to disrespect the principle of confidentiality. I think that as a

researcher, it would have been an inadequate position to legally intervene in these situations. However, in an analysis of this situation conducted by Cowburn (2005), he mentions that the position of the researcher who knows that violence has and is taking place against a known person but does nothing about it could be leaving someone in an ongoing harmful situation, what it is also unethical. A possible solution is to put boundaries on confidentiality since the introduction of the interview to the participants; however, this could put the risk of the quality of the information obtained. So, there is a clear tension between ensuring confidentiality and quality of data and public protection. Should a researcher break confidentiality and report to the authorities when criminal acts are disclosed during a study?

Attitude and behaviour of interviewers

The attitude and behaviour of interviewers clearly play an important role for building rapport with the participants with the aim to obtain reliable information and to minimise possible distress. During the whole fieldwork we tried to be friendly, patient and possess a non-judgmental and respectful attitude. It was important that men felt comfortable during their participation, this helped to gain trust with them. We tried to maintain objectivity after listening to stories of violence. Also, it was important to avoid confrontation or tension when serious stories of violence against the partner were disclosure.

However, it was extremely difficult to remain neutral during the interviews. Listening to men talking about the violence they used against their partners was unpleasant and unsettling. We tried to keep distance after listening to serious stories of violence. We try not show collusion with the participants when they told us their violent stories or when they talked about the 'superiority' of men. We considered that it was not our position to show the participants our point of view or to confront them. However, the problem of taking this attitude is that we could legitimise violence. The interviewer could assume

that we agreed with his position and actions when we did not confront or blame their attitudes and behaviours.

Lessons learned

Undoubtedly, any research involving human subjects must consider ethical standards developed and validated by the scientific community. In this paper I have presented the ethical issues considered for a research on perpetrators of domestic violence, basing on the guidelines established by The Belmont Report and the WHO for domestic violence research. Throughout the paper we could observe that the application of universal ethical standards could present several difficulties which some of them cause important dilemmas for the researcher. How to respond to these dilemmas could be very complex that needs an in-depth ethical and methodological analysis.

To conclude this paper I would like to share some reflections about this thematic that are mainly based on the analysis of the experience of considering ethical issues in a research in sensitive topic. I present them in form of lessons learned.

- A research on a sensitive topic could provoke a tension between the need to conduct research to seek the well-being of the society and the respect and safety of the participants and their communities. Both parts are extremely critical. In this case, the lesson learned is that it is necessary to evaluate if the community really needs a research on that topic or not and to determine how the research will benefit the society. In case that it is considered by the researcher and other experts that the research is needed, the ethical considerations based on the respect of the human rights of all the participants should be a priority.
- When conducting socio-demographic research it is necessary to be more aware of the power relationships that are built between interviewers and respondents. The main recommendations are to get involved in the cultural context before starting the

research, to be extremely careful in the selection and training of fieldworkers and to make a particular effort to build a genuine equal interaction with the participants.

- To ensure quality of data and to care of ethical issues is necessary to understand the local context where research will be carried out. It is important to conduct a situational analysis of the setting, to get support of local contacts, to conduct a pilot work, to be familiar with the local language and to know the policy and legal frameworks of the setting regarding with the topic of research.
- To ensure the respect of rights of research subjects and their communities is paramount. Researchers have a duty to protect everyone involved in the research from harm. Research should not be conducted if ethical issues that protect the rights of participants are not guaranteed.
- Social science researchers have a strong social compromise with the society. They have the ethical obligation to contribute to a better understanding of the topics analysed with the final purpose to benefit the society, particularly the community where research is conducted. Researchers should present in appropriate ways the findings from the research to the community with the aim to contribute to the well-being of the individuals.
- Research should be conducted only if it will be an added value for the knowledge of the topic and if it will benefit the community. Before starting a research it is necessary to evaluate if the information that is being sought is truly needed. Repeated studies in the same community must be avoided. The motivation to carry out research must be only to seek the well-being of the population and nothing else.
- The application of ethical principles needs to take into account the cultural values of the society. It is necessary to be flexible at the moment to apply ethical universal guidelines. However, the respect of human rights must be always a priority. To

respond to ethical dilemmas during a research a cost-benefit analysis of the situation based on human rights should be undertaken to support any decision.

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