

Political interference in disaster research: implications for the integrity of researchers, public trust and well-being of the population

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Structure of the presentation

- Introduction
- Considerations on the importance of outside contextual factors for ethical acceptability of research
- Exploration of the varying level of attention paid to different contextual factors
- Discussion on possible implications of this difference of attention for the results of ethical assessment of research, procedures and parties involved
- Case presentation
- Conclusions - statements on the need to pay more attention to broader contextual factors in ethical assessment of research, especially when it comes to disaster research.

Different attitude to different contextual factors

My ultimate aim is to stimulate reflections on how the assessment of the broad context in which research takes place could be incorporated into existing ethical frameworks of health research

Problem: in a routine research ethics practice, there is a tendency to prioritize certain types of contextual factors over others.

Prioritized contextual factors are likely to be:

- those that are likely to have a direct influence on research
- those related to local settings than to the overall socio-political context,
- those that are likely to make an impact on research participants rather than on communities and other parties involved in research (e.g. researchers).

This at least in part could be explained by the tendency of existing research ethics guidelines to focus more on the assessment of contextual factors that are more relevant to local research settings and to research participants.

Focus on local settings

When assessing the procedures and study design proposed by investigators, reviewers are well aware of the fact that the context matters and procedures that are acceptable in one setting might be unacceptable in another.

However, routine questioning about the effect of contextual factors on the risk/benefit equations of research, voluntariness of consent, subjects' vulnerability and fair distributions of burdens and benefits is usually concentrated on local settings and rarely includes analysis of broader factors of socio-political origin.

Examples:

- validity of consent to participate in research in authoritarian or totalitarian societies
- framing research as a threat and criticism to official policy

Beyrer C, Kass N. (2002) Human rights, politics, and reviews of research ethics
The Lancet , Volume 360 , Issue 9328 , 246 - 251

Disaster in the context

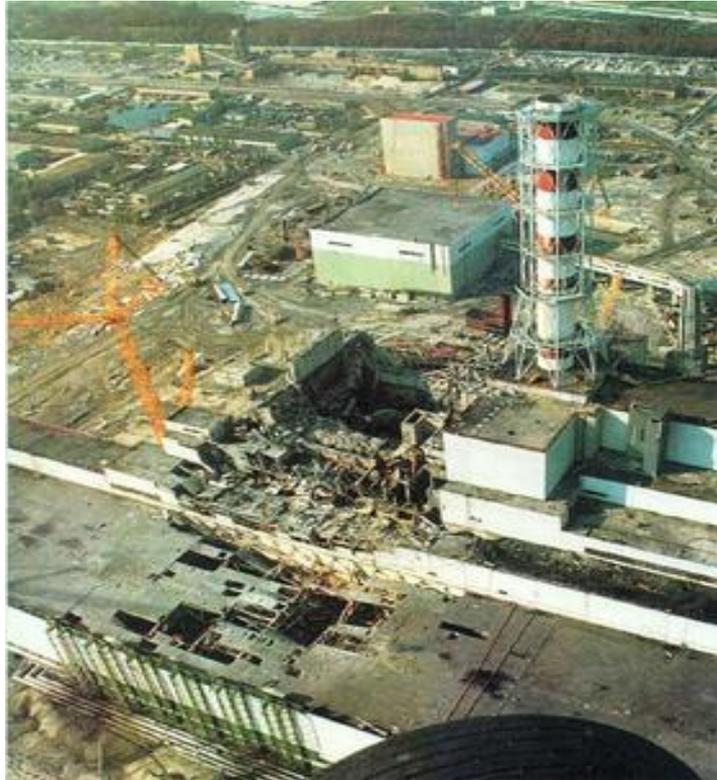
Disaster is a high-profile issue, which touches upon different aspects of social life in a spectrum ranging from individual coping strategies to high-level political crises.

There is a danger that in settings where commitments to democratic principles of governance are weak, political pressure might be executed on disaster research when its results confront official policy.

Implications:

- creating significant challenges to ethical conduct of research
- putting researchers in risk
- compromising scientific validity of research.

The Chernobyl disaster



The nuclear reactor after the disaster.
Reactor 4 (center). Turbine building
(lower left). Reactor 3 (center right).

Time: 01:23 (Moscow Time
UTC+3)

Date: 26 April 1986

Location: Pripyat, (former Ukrainian
SSR, Soviet Union)

Cause: Inadvertent explosion of
core during emergency shutdown of
reactor whilst undergoing power
failure experiment

Deaths: 31 (direct)

The Chernobyl disaster



The abandoned city of with Chernobyl plant in the distance

The resulting fire sent a plume of highly radioactive fallout into the atmosphere and over an extensive geographical area, including Pripyat. The plume drifted over large parts of the western Soviet Union and Europe. From 1986 to 2000, **350,400** people were evacuated and resettled from the most severely contaminated areas of Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine. According to official post-Soviet data about 60% of the fallout landed in Belarus.

Yury Bandazhevsky's research

Chronic Cs-137 incorporation in children's organs

Y. I. Bandazhevsky

Summary

In Belarus's Gomel region, which was heavily contaminated by fallout from the Chernobyl disaster, we have studied the evolution of the Cs-137 load in the organisms of the rural population, in particular children, since 1990. Children have a higher average burden of Cs-137 compared with that of adults living in the same community.

We measured the Cs-137 levels in organs ex-

amined at autopsy. The highest accumulation of Cs-137 was found in the endocrine glands, in particular the thyroid, the adrenals and the pancreas. High levels were also found in the heart, the thymus and the spleen.

Key words: Chernobyl children; radiocaesium; thyroid; adrenals; pancreas; thymus; myocardium

Yury Bandazhevsky's research

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CASE INFORMATION: YURI BANDAZHEVSKY



DATE OF BIRTH:	January 9, 1957
COUNTRY:	Belarus
PROFESSION:	Nuclear Medicine Specialist
DATE OF ARREST:	July 13, 1999
STATUS:	Conditionally released

Summary and Current Status

Belarusian nuclear medical specialist Yuri Bandazhevsky was conditionally released from custody on August 5, 2005, after having served four years of what had originally been an eight-year sentence for allegedly accepting bribes from students seeking admission to the Gomel State Medical Institute. The CHR believes that Professor Bandazhevsky—who was rector of the Gomel State Medical Institute at the time of his arrest—was actually targeted for his outspoken criticism of Belarusian government policies regarding the health effects of the Chernobyl disaster on the local population. Throughout his ordeal, Professor Bandazhevsky always maintained his innocence.

After his release, Professor Bandazhevsky returned to his home in Minsk, where he was ordered to remain under the control of the Belarusian authorities for five years. His conditions of release included having to report regularly to the police for six months and being prohibited from assuming any managerial or political functions.

Related Links

[Belarusian Scientist Yuri Bandazhevsky Conditionally Released](#) (8/15/2005)

[Action Update: Belarusian Scientist Yuri Bandazhevsky Denied Parole](#) (3/18/2005)

[Action Alert: Belarusian Scientist Yuri Bandazhevsky's Health Deteriorates](#) (9/18/2002)

[Action Alert: Belarusian Scientist Yuri Bandazhevsky Imprisoned](#) (9/21/2001)

Belarus - COUNTRY PROFILE



Location: North-East Europe

Land Area: 207,600 sq km

Population: 9.47 million (76% in urban centers)

Former Soviet Union Republic, now member of CIS

Not a member of CoE

Corruption Perceptions Index 31 (LT 58, FI 89)
0 (highly corrupt) - 100 (very clean)

Belongs to 'World's Most Repressive Societies' (Freedom House 2014)

Currently, under economic sanctions from EU and US,
political contacts are limited

<http://goeasteurope.about.com>

Conclusions

Since then, no research on the effect of small doses of radiation on public health has been conducted in Belarus and the impact of this factor of Chernobyl disaster on public health remains largely unknown.

The case of political interference in disaster research sets a dangerous precedent of domination of political considerations over social value and scientific merit of this type of research.

To ensure that research is free from any ideological burden and the integrity of researchers is respected, more attention should be paid to aspects of overarching contextual conditions when ethical assessments of research are made.

There is a need to further explore the issue of how these considerations should be incorporated in ethical guidelines on disaster research.

Thank you for your interest!

Questions?