

The Ethics of Social Research with Children and Families in Young Lives: Practical Experiences

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Research ethics exist to ensure that the principles of justice, respect and avoiding doing harm are upheld, using agreed standards. At the heart of these principles are questions of how to balance the interests of individual participants and those of their family or community with the goals of the research. A great deal of attention is now being paid to the ethics of social research in general and with children in particular, and a growing body of literature is emerging that describes the processes, practices and difficulties that arise in developing and developed countries. This paper aims to contribute to these debates.

Young Lives, a long-term international research study of childhood poverty, takes a positive view of ethics as enabling high-quality research. Young Lives requires the building and maintenance of trusting relationships with children, their families and communities over time (15 years). This paper describes the approach that Young Lives has adopted, as well as some of the difficulties encountered in fieldwork and strategies for attempting to resolve these problems. Initially, ethics approaches in Young Lives were developed collaboratively with the country research teams, and the aim of Young Lives training on research ethics is to develop a shared understanding across the whole study team. This is a complex task, involving different academic traditions and disciplines, and differing power dynamics within and between research teams and communities studied. There is also the very obvious power dynamic of difference in age, with research teams working with children as young as 6 or 7 years old.

The paper discusses the following topics. Firstly, it describes the process of seeking informed consent, and related questions of raised expectations in research with people in very poor communities. Researchers must obtain the informed consent of parents and caregivers, and of children who have the capacity to consent. Research teams attempt to ensure that the purpose of the research is clearly explained, that children and adults understand what they are agreeing to, and that their expectations of being involved in the research are not raised or unrealistic. Fieldworkers are also clearly instructed

that informed consent must be freely given and voluntary, and that people need time to think about participation. However, despite these efforts, research teams have found that there are widely differing understandings of the purpose of research. In some cases, participants associated Young Lives with various other programmes and initiatives, and thus had expectations of individual help or benefit. The author notes that in poor communities, it is sometimes difficult for people to distinguish research from aid projects or interventions, and the use of terms such as 'project' may add to this confusion. Secondly, the paper discusses questions related to compensating research respondents for their time. While payments can be made to reimburse expenses or people's time, they should not be made to encourage people to take part as an 'incentive' because this puts pressure on participants. Within Young Lives, each country team deals with the question of payment in locally specific ways, reflecting the cultural context and the reality of poverty. Thirdly, the paper explores parents' expressed fears about the research and some child protection questions. The author gives examples from Young Lives of how research teams have worked with parents to allay their concerns. The paper also discusses aspects of managing long-term relationships in research, questions of consent to data archiving, and explores some of the possible effects on children and their families of being involved in the study.

The paper suggests that understanding local contexts is crucial in explanations of how people respond to being involved in Young Lives. The author provides a number of recommendations for future rounds of research, including attention to the gender of fieldworkers and the need to take into account sensitive political situations. The paper emphasises that attention to research ethics is not a one-off, tick-box activity, but is an ongoing process that relates to the interactions between researchers and research respondents and beyond, to analysis of data and dissemination of findings. Young Lives will continue to develop its ethics approach with research teams and fieldworkers, adapting as the study learns more about doing long-term research with children and families.

