



# ETHICAL RESEARCH INVOLVING CHILDREN

Centre for Children  
and Young People



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# HARMS AND BENEFITS

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## **The work with interpreters in a cultural-sensitive environment**

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### ***Background context:***

Important and unique challenges arise when conducting research in a cultural environment more or less unknown to the researcher who follows a Western cultural tradition. Even though researchers arrive well-prepared at the research site in the different culture, they will face many expected and unexpected obstacles which they have to overcome. One of the most persistent problems constitutes the lack of knowing the language. In a study which was implemented four years after the 2004 Tsunami at the worst hit part of Southern India the researcher learnt about the confronted multi-layered challenges. One of the study's work-packages focused on the identification of subjective well-being indicators from a caregiver's and child's perspective in the given sub-culture. It aimed to develop a culturally-sensitive instrument in order to gather data on children's resources as a complement to the data collection concerning the children's long-term effects of trauma.

### ***The ethical challenge:***

The region where the study took place was a very remote district of Southern India. Mostly fishing families who were affected by the Tsunami lived there. Study participants were children who lived with their biological parents as well as children who lost their parents due to the Tsunami and lived in alternative out-of-home care. The children hardly spoke English and their only experience with people of a Western cultural background traced back to the Tsunami relief actions. During her stay in India the researcher learnt more and more about what the application of the concept of vertical collectivism in real life means and specifically for children: full approval of authorities and hierarchies; non-questioned respect towards adults; obedience; duty; and reliability. In order to gain insight into children's subjective well-being, a harmonious atmosphere with very few behavioural restrictions was created. This atmosphere should stimulate children to answer frankly to the focus group questions. They were stimulated to behave in a way that was not in accordance with their usual way of behaving towards adults. This was one side of the coin. The other side concerned adult interpreters who exactly would have expected the behaviour of children as described above. The tightrope walk was to find adequate interpreters who, on the one side, served as culture brokers and, on the other side, were able to integrate a rather different way of approaching children without losing sight of their cultural values.

### ***Choices made:***

From the local university's Department of Social Work, two students (male and female) for interpreting in same-sex groups were recruited. The students were recruited according to the following criteria: bi-lingual (Tamil and English) – especially their spoken Tamil was of importance as in the Tamil language there is a huge gap between spoken

and written Tamil; openness to follow another approach in dealing with children without giving up their own cultural values; consequence and perseverance in the requested manner of interpreting. The choice was consciously made not to use professional interpreters as it was feared that their professional attitude would have silenced the children. The students were trained for two days on the aim of the project, and were provided with relevant background information on different theoretical concepts (e.g., trauma, well-being).

A code of conduct was written concerning how to deal with the children (e.g., no punishment; self-determined working in small groups) and why the researcher would like that they deal in that specific way with the children. The reasoning for this code was also interactively discussed with the interpreters. In addition, they were trained in their actual task: interpreting. They were requested (1) to interpret in short units of meaning, (2) to avoid self-initiated interposed questions, (3) to avoid side-conversations with the children during the focus group sessions, (4) to participate in games and other relaxation exercises, and (5) confidentiality. Before each session we discussed the implementation plan and prepared mentally for the group. After each session a feedback round with the interpreters was undertaken. As a result we were able to create a group atmosphere characterized by mutual friendliness and trust, so that children frankly shared their thoughts and feelings.

***Reflexive questions/considerations:***

- What is the cultural custom to deal or work with children?
- Does the study implementation require the creation of a trustful atmosphere with the help of the interpreters?
- How to work with interpreters when their task is on the one hand “pure” interpreting, but the group setting requests their involvement?
- Which strategies are developed preventively in case of potential distress through the research intervention? How are interpreters prepared for this possible harm?

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