



ETHICAL RESEARCH INVOLVING CHILDREN

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HARMS AND BENEFITS

Implementing international research ethics in the complex realities of local contexts: Poverty, the cultural value of hospitality, and researchers trying to do no harm in Pakistan

Background context:

In many cultures around the world, hospitality is a strong value. This is the case in Pakistan. The ethic of hospitality means that guests are treated with great respect and honour, and hosts will go out of their way to give their time and help to visitors. Guests are given tea, snacks, and sometimes even a full meal, to honour their visit. The cultural expectation of the guest is to accept this hospitality graciously, often after an initial cursory refusal.

Through my work with different organizations in Pakistan, I have had the opportunity to visit homes, schools and communities in different parts of the country with other research team members. When our research teams visit homes and schools in Pakistan, we are welcomed with this strong sense of hospitality. Families and school representatives prepare or make arrangements for refreshments for research team members who visit them.

The ethical challenge:

This value of hospitality is strong in Pakistani communities – even from, and perhaps especially from, families and schools that are struggling financially. Arrangements for refreshments can be a financial strain on families and schools that are already struggling to make ends meet. At schools, the arrangements often involve pulling female teachers and female students out of classroom activities to prepare and serve refreshments to visitors.

However, to refuse families' and communities' hospitality – even if it is done in a gracious and respectful way – risks being perceived negatively. The refusal may be perceived at best as cursory (cultural etiquette where you first say no but then accept), and at worst as disrespectful and even arrogant. It could negatively affect the relationship with communities, limiting the willingness and openness of potential research participants to share their time and perspectives in the research process. Also, the offering and accepting of tea and refreshments provides a culturally familiar space and time in which informal conversation and interaction can happen, easing some of the formality around the research process for both the prospective research participants and the research team.

Our research teams struggled with this. We have felt that the ethic of respecting cultural values and norms here was at odds with the research ethic of 'do no harm'.

We had the following choices. We could accept families' and schools' hospitality graciously, acknowledging the strain it placed on them. We also considered accepting the hospitality, but offering compensation for their inconvenience (e.g., giving money to cover the costs of the tea or refreshments) – but were told by community members that this could be viewed as insulting. Alternately, we could refuse families' and schools' hospitality altogether, risking being perceived as ungracious and disrespectful.

Choices made:

We decided that we would try to graciously refuse food and refreshments, citing “organizational policy” if needed so that research team members themselves would not be perceived personally as disrespectful of communities' hospitality.

This was easier said than done. Despite our gentle insistence that we could not accept food and refreshments, families and school representatives would often arrange them anyway and place them in front of us. Perhaps our refusal was considered cursory, part of the cultural etiquette. At that point, when the cost and energy had already been spent in providing the refreshments, it would be considered very rude for us to refuse. Sometimes we would just accept one biscuit and leave the rest untouched – in the hopes that others, including children, might eat them later.

This issue is something with which other researchers and I continue to struggle. Our response to this issue continues to evolve as we understand and negotiate cultural expectations and relationships. We try to state right at the beginning that we cannot accept any tea or refreshments. Sometimes this works, but more often than not we are offered refreshments anyway. Either way, we make sure to give a gift of thanks at the end of the visit. We do not frame it as compensation but rather as a token of thanks. We try to ensure that the gift is something that the research participants would appreciate, and that in financial value it is equivalent to, if not more than, the financial expenses they would have incurred. For example, at a school, we may give a small bag of school supplies such as pencils, erasers, and crayons which can be used by the children and teachers.

Reflexive questions/considerations:

It can be difficult to reconcile research ethics which are considered universal with the complex realities of the local contexts in which research is carried out. How do we manage it when cultural values and norms are at odds with a research ethic?

The case study here is an example of how research ethics can be complex in cultures which strongly value hospitality. Hospitality not only places a strain on the hosting families and communities, but also often makes it difficult for families and communities to refuse consent when guests have entered their home or community. If welcoming and helping a guest is culturally expected, even required, then how can you know if consent is truly voluntary? This applies even more strongly in the case of children. Children are raised with these same values, to welcome and help guests, and in addition, to respect their elders. In this context, can a child truly refuse to participate in an interview or other research activity? And if they cannot refuse, then is their consent or assent really voluntary? How can we know?

How do you integrate research ethics and the research process with cultural expectations and norms around interactions and relationships?

Is this something that could be discussed openly and honestly at a meeting with community representatives and elders? Is there a local ethics review board, or could one be established, to discuss and advise on such issues in light of local realities and cultural values and norms?

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