

HARMS AND BENEFITS

Immediacy of fieldwork in participatory research with children in precarious contexts

Background context:

Conducting participatory fieldwork with children can result in a researcher becoming involved in their lives more broadly, blurring the lines around the researcher role. This may be particularly the case when working with children in precarious situations, such as AIDS-affected children, parentless children, child beggars, child laborers, and street children. As educated, relatively wealthy, interested and supportive adults, researchers appear to hold considerable power and children may see this as a potential benefit or asset that could help to improve their situation. Researchers who undertake research with children in these sorts of contexts are generally motivated by social justice and seek through their work to help improve the conditions of these children's lives and others like them. These underlying motivations – a desire to be helped and a desire to help – can create added ethical complexity to participatory research relationships, particularly in relation to expectations, safety and capacity. In this case study, which is somewhat connected to my case study in the Payment and Compensation section on reciprocity in participatory research with children, I draw on an example of an incident involving the police and street children that occurred when I was undertaking participatory research in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

The ethical challenge:

Reflecting on my many fieldwork trips to Ethiopia, I have found that participatory research requires me to be 'spontaneous': to move away from my theoretical and philosophical pretensions and attend to the urgency of my participants' contexts. This is something I refer to as the 'immediacy of fieldwork' and is perhaps best illustrated by the following incident.

Example: An incident with the police

One afternoon, I saw many children and adults gathered at a street corner in Addis Ababa where I had been conducting long-term fieldwork. I approached the crowd and tried to ask what had happened, but everyone's attention was directed towards one a boy, aged about 14 years, who was bleeding heavily from his nose.



I had not met the boy before, but some of the children from my study told me that he was one of their friends. They further told me that he was bleeding because he had been hit by a policeman who believed that he and his friends had stolen or seen the person who had stolen a purse from a car parked on the other side of the street. The police had not been present when the incident happened, but they acted to 'entice the truth' based primarily on the report made by the owner of the car.

This encounter with the police in Addis Ababa is something I stumbled upon – it did not happen during an official fieldwork encounter. Given this, I could perhaps have chosen to walk by. However, Schepher-Hughes argues that politically and morally engaged research requires its practitioners to be 'witnesses' instead of 'spectators.' She suggests that if researchers deny themselves the power to identify an ill or a wrong and choose to ignore the extent to which people experience suffering, they collaborate with the relations of power that allow the suffering to continue. Similarly, as a human being who knows these children, it is difficult not to become involved. This experience is emblematic of how many aspects of participatory fieldwork are unpredictable and beyond our control. They reveal that fieldwork is a personal and political process, but it is also a deeply humanizing journey.

Even if approaching the above incident solely from a research perspective, to walk by without acknowledging the children would undoubtedly have had repercussions for my research relationships with them, undermining trust and perhaps even appearing from the children's perspective that I was complicit with the police. Indeed, to me, participatory research suggests that *participating* in the lives of fieldwork subjects is an unavoidable part of the process. If nothing else, this incident offered me further insight into the injustice the children in my study faced.

Of course, there are risks associated with becoming involved such incidents. Thinking through ethics we generally place greatest focus upon the safety of the child participants, but in this instance I could have put myself potentially at risk by using my relative power and authority to stand up to the police on the children's behalf.

Choices made:

So, what did I do? In brief, my inquiries as to why the police had hit the children instead of pursuing the case systematically resulted in a quarrel with one of the police officers. Subsequently, I was asked to follow them to the police station. The police officer with whom I had exchanged words created an excuse to leave the



station, while I was simply kept there because he knew that without his presence my new-found case, namely interfering with police business, would not be processed.

This incident on the streets of Addis Ababa highlights how fieldwork is an emotive period -- when emotions rather than the intellectual work of 'rationalness' -- are shaped, developed, and expressed. It opened new dimensions of ethical space in which I experienced and worked out my feelings of fear, harassment, and intimidation. It also raised questions of if, and the extent to which, researchers can explore their emotional responses and be socially and emotionally available to the children with whom they are researching. In participatory research, the theoretical separation of 'the self' from others, and the research itself is not so easily accomplished. This is because the research, the researcher, and the researched are tightly bound together and the boundaries become redefined and continuously blurred through social interactions (see Katz 1994).

Reflexive questions/considerations:

Phillips (1998) noted how respectful relationship is the core of participatory research. He argues for ethical reflexivity i.e. how the capacity of researchers to be conscious of, and give an account of, their actions are both a skill and a virtue – a process through which tacit knowledge might be rendered explicit and subsequently shared. This idea lends useful interpretations for participatory ethics. By participatory ethics I mean the everyday, messy, and real-world experience of research. Participatory ethics creates possibilities for research participants to define the space of research before, during, and after fieldwork so that research can truly contribute towards social transformation.

In this way, participatory ethics (or in-situ or situated ethics) is different from institutional ethics. Institutional ethics is about what research relationships with children should be, whereas participatory ethics is about what research relationships with them could be. The former is prescriptive whereas the latter is imaginative (Cahill et al. 2007). Participatory ethics is grounded in the philosophies and worldviews of the researched, as well as their ways of interaction, knowing, and sharing information. It includes identifying and using local language, oral literature, storytelling, etc. as foundations and sources of knowledge and methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation regarding the researched who might be illiterate. The process of imagining research via the lens of participatory ethics enables us to decenter dominant (institutional) ethical frameworks, articulating the overlapping spaces of respect and empowerment of local populations in/during/through research. In this sense, participatory ethics becomes a vehicle for the contestation of different aspects of the research



process, viewing ethical research as a living practice, as being situated in places, cultures, and relationships and in ways that value and respect them.

On the basis of such considerations the following questions might guide further reflexive engagement:

- Where can we draw the line around the role of researcher when intervening in issues in children's lives?
- How do we make such decisions in immediate fieldwork moments?
- How might such decisions affect research relationships and the research insights gathered?
- Is it ethical to research suffering and poverty experienced by children and yet do nothing?

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