PAYMENT AND COMPENSATION

Reciprocity in participatory research with precarious children

Background context:

This case study draws on fieldwork encounters when undertaking research on precarious childhoods in Ethiopia. This research involved children who are found on the margins of society and political economy including AIDS-affected children, parentless children, child beggars, child laborers, and street children. Teachers, parents, NGO workers, etc. were also deliberately included in the research, while simultaneously creating the space for children to share their own experiences and perspectives on their lives. This strategy aimed to generate knowledge about childhoods in their 'natural settings' and capture how generational relations work in practice, be it on the streets or on farms, schools or markets in the villages.

In their ERIC case study on payments to young researchers in Malawi, Robson, Munthali, Porter and Hampshire debate the ethics of whether to pay or not to pay young people involved in research. I believe that a participatory approach to research positions the research process as essentially a 'two-way street.' In my studies I strived towards collaborative knowledge production that builds on the local values/perception/significance/expectations of the research rather than a top-down approach where the practices of research are defined from outside. Therefore, like Robson et al., I believed that to *not* give something back to the local communities nor compensate for children's time and knowledge would be exploitative, and would reinforce existing power structures – Norwegian / Ethiopian, rich / poor, formally educated / uneducated, adult / child. Working from this standpoint, in this case study I go beyond the dilemmas of whether 'to pay or not to pay' and reflect upon the immediacy of fieldwork, reciprocity and how payment and compensation can become embroiled within the research relationships integral to a study, complicating the 'professional' role of researcher.

The ethical challenge:

I believe that attending to the everydayness of participants' circumstances can be one way of reciprocating them for their willingness to cooperate and co-construct the reality about their lives. However, this creates an 'ethics of engagement' that requires us to attend to the immediate and the personal – that is, the most

beneficial or pressing forms of 'compensation' for an individual participant might not become evident until fieldwork is underway. Reciprocity is the product of interrelationships and that ethical principles are lived in, reproduced, and experienced by research participants through social interactions.

For example, on one occasion an ailing grandmother caring for her AIDS-orphaned grandchildren had put one her grandsons up for international adoption, in the hopes of improving his life chances. The boy had been processed and was ready to leave for Europe. However, the grandmother had not fully understood the legal consequences of her decision in terms of the adopted child's relationship with their blood relatives and siblings. She wanted me to assist her in tracking down her grandson and to have him back. On another occasion, I found myself marched by police to a police station in Addis Ababa after making inquiries as to why the friend of some of the children involved in my study had been hit by a police officer.

Over the longer term, many children who have been involved in my studies have written me personal letters asking me if I can find them potential sponsors in Norway that could support them financially. Some children have even asked me to take them to Europe. Although I always inform children and their families regarding my status as an academic, some participants find it hard to believe that someone like me who works with NGOs that fund 'AIDS orphans' could not be without the connections, know-how and the capacity to assist. Such expectations remind that participatory fieldwork is more than a mere pursuit of academic knowledge. It highlights that participatory research is as much about human beings as it is about understanding the everyday realities of local population - fieldwork is a personal and political process, but it is also a deeply humanizing journey.

While participants' requests or expectations may exceed the role of researcher and even what might be possible, not attending to participants' expectations may risk leaving them *feeling* exploited despite best intentions to the contrary. On the other hand, attempting to meet participants' requests risks opening the flood gates and / or further disadvantaging their peers who were unable or 'unlucky' enough to participate in the research. Therefore, the immediacy of fieldwork and the nature of participatory research relations more broadly raise dilemmas that speak to wider questions of reciprocity, i.e., what and how to 'give back' to participants that might help alleviate the sorts of issues that necessitated the research in the first place.

Choices made:

I expected to some extent to adapt my payment and compensation to the circumstances of the participants. For those children who attended schools, I gave or paid for their stationery materials (books, pens, and exercise books). On the streets, I gave money to children (to compensate for time lost begging for example) and paid for the meals we frequently shared. When photo methods were used, many children also found it 'fun' to have a photo album of their own in which a copy of all the pictures that they took of themselves, their friends, and families were presented to them as 'thank you' gifts at the end of fieldwork. I consider this sort of payment and compensation to individual participants to be a form of short-term reciprocity.

However, these forms of compensation do not fully attend to the expectations that arise in the research relationships created during fieldwork. For example, with the means and know-how to do so, I did call the adaption agency on behalf of the grandmother and helped to explain her situation. They informed me that having signed all the legal documentation she had relinquished her rights as a parent. She said she had signed the document without having read or fully understood the ramifications. I tried to get the adoption agency to reconsider, but they had already closed the case and handed over the child to the new legal parents who were ready to travel abroad. In this way I tried my best to help the grandmother, although on this occasion my efforts were largely futile. However, as a human being, not just a researcher, the desperation of the grandmother compelled me to go further and I stopped by a couple of hotels where foreign adopters often stay. I saw the boy with his adopting parents. In my field notes I wrote, 'I am unsure about what to do or whether to inform the grandmother regarding the boys' whereabouts. I am aware that any action I take will have its implications (legal and ethical) but my inaction also leaves me with the feeling/burden of having done nothing to the grandmother's predicament.' On this occasion I decided I had done my best to help, so I did nothing further, although this dilemma remains with me to this day.

Committed to long-lasting reciprocity as integral to participatory research, one of my proactive strategies in giving something back to the local population more broadly is to support NGOs to write an application for funding from donors so that they can develop action-oriented projects. I have found this to be particularly appreciated by NGOs in Ethiopia as their staff often have limited knowledge and experience in developing grant proposals in the English language and have not much exposure to funding organizations. I feel this helps to directly support the children involved in my studies, their peers who were not and future children and young people in similar circumstances. Beyond this, dissemination of my research findings not just in academic circles but in workshops, schools, conferences, universities, and national seminars in Ethiopia would constitute further long-term

reciprocity for the participants in my studies and for others in similar situations. I also conducted several formal and informal meetings with government actors and NGOs to share my research findings in ways that I hope can affect practice.

Reflexive questions/considerations:

- How can we understand reciprocity to mean beyond material rewards for child participants?
- How can children inform us about research relations and reciprocity?
- What does loyalty mean in fieldwork encounters? How can one navigate it?
- Where can one draw the boundary between being a researcher and a loyal human ally?
- Is it ethical to research suffering and poverty experienced by children and yet do nothing?

Contributed by: Tatek Abebe, Professor of Childhood Studies, Norwegian Centre for Child Research/Department of Education and Lifelong Learning, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, NTNU, N-7491 Trondheim, Norway tatek.abebe@ntnu.no


ETHICAL
RESEARCH
INVOLVING
CHILDREN


ETHICAL
RESEARCH
INVOLVING
CHILDREN