Reflections from fieldwork in rural India: ethics as a cultural value

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Introduction
This article presents reflections on ethical practices that arose while conducting ethnographic research in rural India. As an outsider conducting cross-cultural research, I have reflected on how different ethical values may be held by different cultures. The multitude of cultural diversity, local contexts, and its impact on ethics is not commonly captured when designing and requesting ethical approval from academic or research institutions. I suggest that ethics in research moves towards a more culturally sensitive framework where ethics are constructed around trust and reciprocity, and researcher and participant become associates.

Cross-cultural ethical values: whose ethics count?
I was very excited to finally arrive at Bodhgaya, in the Indian state of Bihar; after more than a year working in the preliminary stages of my PhD, I was finally going to start my fieldwork! Prior to travelling to India, I had to obtain the necessary approvals, which involved submitting numerous forms and documents. The ethics approval centred on ensuring my own safety whilst in India as well as safeguarding the participants' anonymity and voluntary participation. Once I was in the field, however, feelings of inadequacy arose and lead me to reflect on the cross-cultural nature of my research.

My project evaluates the empowerment effect that working in a male-dominated environment can have for women and their communities. I had travelled to the small village of Bodhgaya to explore a programme managed by an NGO that trains women to become rickshaw drivers, a male-dominated activity in India. This programme takes place in one of the poorest and most conservative states of India. The women participating in this programme were married at a very early age, initially becoming housewives and working in the fields before becoming rickshaw drivers. Most have hardly attended school and never left their village. Their reality could not be farther from mine, a white western woman who has lived in various countries and is now pursuing a doctorate. I am an outsider conducting cross-cultural and cross-language research in India. This ‘outsiderness’ made me reflect on the ethical review process I am following and consider the reasoning behind it more carefully. In an unfamiliar setting, you start looking into everything in more detail. What words should I use? What kind of language will be appropriate? How can I make sure they understand what I am doing so they give fully informed consent?

As a ‘responsible fieldworker’ (Wax, 1982) I place a lot of emphasis on the general principles around ethical research: avoid exploitation, guarantee privacy and anonymity (Sullivan, 2009). In interviewing female rickshaw drivers and other members of their community and to comply with rigorous ethics principles, I made much effort to provide comprehensible information about the research and obtain informed consent. This meant not only translating forms into the participants’ local language, but also displaying the information in a way accessible to the participants, bearing in mind cultural and individual considerations. However, my interviewees were not particularly concerned about the details of where the interviews would take place or how I was going to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. This was not because they were uninterested in participating in the project – they appeared excited to talk to me and share their opinions, but rather because they were indifferent to notions of anonymity, confidentiality and other details of my ethics approach. Is it possible that culturally and contextually, these concepts were not particularly relevant to their lives?

As other authors (Sullivan, 2009; Marzano, 2007; Scheyvens, 2014) have acknowledged, different cultures have different systems of ethical principles and values. However, confidentiality and anonymity are key values when conducting research in social sciences, without considering how these are addressed in different cultural contexts. Ethics reviewers want to ensure that the information provided by participants remains private and that respondents cannot be identified. However, during my fieldwork I was the only one encouraging it, while my interviewees were comfortable talking anywhere, including the hall of a busy office, not paying much attention to who was around. I kept suggesting quiet and private spaces to conduct interviews while they seemed to not understand my obsession for isolated places.
In my experience, getting access to members of the community was possible thanks to a relation built on trust and closeness. I felt people were trusting me because I was introduced by an NGO they knew and trusted. They were also very interested in how and why I have ended up in that little village, and appreciated I was staying there and living amongst them. I believe the major factors contributing to their openness to me were the relation of trust and respect, and these were negotiated communally. According to Chadda and Deb (2013, p.299): “Indian society promotes social cohesion and interdependence”. In contrast to western societies, where the individual tends to be at the centre, I noticed the individual in this community was more embedded within familial and social relations, and their values are understood from within these social networks and interactions. If this is the case, why are we still promoting the same principles when conducting research? Can we imagine a more participatory and culturally inclusive framework? What could we do instead?

**Ethical framework and research reciprocities**

By reflecting on the first steps of my research journey, I have been able to identify the ethical dilemmas and discrepancies one might face when ‘in the field’, particularly in cross-cultural research. Despite the big range of ethical guidance available from universities, funders and associations, little attention has been given to the ethics of the communities where research takes place (Sumner, 2007). To amend this, I would suggest moving away from the standard top-down process and instead creating ethical frameworks that acknowledge different cultural contexts. In such frameworks, ‘informed consent’ would be enhanced by ‘research reciprocity’. Research reciprocity was first developed by Wax (1982) as a reaction to the new regulation for the protection of human research subjects in the United States. He considered that informed consent was not useful for anthropologists and advocated for ‘research reciprocity’, understanding the field process as a continuum where relationships are continually renegotiated. My experience mirrors Wax’s account: I felt my host community focused less on the details of my project, and more on actions that showed my character and disposition. It was by staying in the village, trying to learn their language and wearing matching Salwar, kameez and dupatta, the traditional local clothes in the North of India, that demonstrated my respect for the local ways and brought trust and acceptance (Wax and Wax, 1980).

In order to develop the notion of research reciprocity, I explored Participatory Action Research (PAR) and the idea of plurality as a key concept (Santos, 2016). Here, building a “non-hierarchical, non-manipulative research relationship” (Cotterill, 1992, p. 594) is important. This perspective links with the work of Freire (1972) and his goal of decentralising education and honouring multiple cultures, which could also be applied to ethical values in research. These approaches are based on the idea that participants should be included in most parts of the research, including ethics. For Wax, creating a more participatory ethical framework means participant and researcher must become peers so “communication can be open, direct, and informative” (Wax, 1982, p. 46). This would require the researcher to operate beyond the requirements of formal and explicit informed consent. Under these circumstances, consent grows into a “negotiated and lengthy process” (Wax, 1980, p. 275), but the researcher would benefit from a more sensitive position. I suggest developing a bottom-up approach to ethics by the researcher coming to understand what the community sees as harm and what their boundaries and concerns are.

**Conclusion**

In this reflection, I have presented ethical issues that arose while conducting ethnographic research in rural India. Despite the effort made to provide comprehensible information about the research, including cultural and individual considerations, I did not feel these were important for my participants. Instead, they seemed to appreciate that I had travelled to their small village and I was staying there, trying to learn the local language, and collaborating with a local NGO they knew and trusted. It was through these actions and reciprocal interest that I gained the participants’ trust, entering a relationship of reciprocal respect with the host community.

These reflections on my experience lead me to advocate for reconsidering the formal and bureaucratic top-down ethical process and adopt a more flexible and participatory approach. This includes the idea of ‘research reciprocity’ that happens only when researcher and participant become associates, working in an environment of trust and mutual respect.
References


