

Guidelines for an ethical approach to doing research for international interns



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This is an introduction to some of the issues that I faced as an international intern in connecting with research respondents in an ethical fashion. Based on six months of observations during research activities carried out as an intern with the Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), I have developed a set of suggestions which may help guide other international interns and researchers working with individuals and communities in India and beyond.

Ethical issues to consider prior to starting research within a community

The research priority is the people. Regardless of the specific research goals and the larger structure of the research project, your priority should be the people who you are interviewing. Throughout the research process, remind yourself of this: at the end of the day, the people matter more than you getting information or producing a document that satisfies your internship requirements or the expectations of your supervisors.



Choose participatory research when you can. The type of research you do is important, and especially if you are not from the country in which you are working it is best to aim for a participatory approach. Participatory research is a bottom-up approach to research that involves equal collaboration with community members throughout the entire process. This means discussing and developing research question/s with community members based on what they identify as important or valuable to them. It includes shared decision-making, shared ownership of the results, and ongoing collaboration.



Develop a plan. Work with individuals who are actively involved in the communities where you will be, and develop a research plan for a broad topic. Then, after you have done a couple of interviews, narrow down the specifics, working with community members and with the help of a translator, to identify what people actually want to talk about, and to agree on a topic where you may be able to make a difference.

Lay out a realistic plan ahead of time so that you do not end up wasting the time of others and so that you have a concrete guide to refer to. At the same time, keep this plan flexible to ensure that everyone involved can participate equally.

Do not research something that people do not want to talk about!

Keep an open mindset. There is a lot that will be out of your control, but you can control your own mindset. You should strive for a mindset that is open to, curious about and

accepting of cultural

differences. Be ready to unlearn and reflect upon your own assumptions. Your mindset will significantly impact the research process, the way you interview people, and the impact you have on those around you. Remember your place as an intern and a learner, despite being in a position of power as ‘the researcher.’ Value and appreciate the knowledge and time of the participants, field animators, translators, and your supervisors.



Getting informed consent from participants

Get informed consent. Before each interview, clearly explain who you are, where you come from, who you are working with, what the research is and why you are doing it. Make sure participants know that they should participate only if they want to; there will be no consequences or judgement if they do not participate. They can stop any time and there is no right or wrong answer. Everything they say will be anonymous unless they choose otherwise, and they should ask questions any time they have them. In many societies it is common to require a form to be

signed laying out the rights of participants. However, this is only beneficial if the form is typed in the participant's first language, and if the participant is able to read it themselves. Be cautious about using forms and obtaining signatures, as this might create an uncomfortable environment, but make sure your participant knows what is going on and what is going to be done with the information.



Ask before recording. Always get permission to record, and be very clear about what you will do with the recording. If participants agree to being recorded but seem uncomfortable, do not record. I encountered this several times, and never recorded if anyone looked uncomfortable. Remember: the priority is the people, not the research outcome.



Take notes respectfully. Ask first, and explain why you are taking notes. If participants have time after the interview, ask the translator to translate back what you have written. This is a good way to double check that participants are still okay with sharing what you have noted down, and it helps to ensure that their thoughts and experiences are not being misrepresented.

Ask before sharing results. Whether you are sharing results with field animators, policy makers, community members, or anyone else, get permission first. Do this regardless of whether or not the participants are anonymous.

Working with a translator

Respect the translator's role in the research. Translating is a lot more work than it seems! Communicate what you are doing, why you are doing it, and treat them as a person, not as a translating app. The translator is a huge part of the research, and will probably end up doing more than 'simply' translating. The translator I worked with was more like a co-researcher than a translator and it was from her that I learned about doing research ethically in a situation where there are no firm guidelines. We always discussed the goals of the research together, and we worked together to try to make our research process more ethical. Always be appreciative and thank the translator!



Ensure that you have the translator's informed consent. Just as you explain consent to those you interview, you should make this clear to the translator as well. The translator should know what you will be doing and why, and who you will be working with. They should feel comfortable asking questions and expressing any discomfort or concerns they have. Do not push them to do anything they are uncomfortable with.



Provide compensation for the translator. Translating is a difficult job, and should be paid. Discuss this with your supervisor beforehand. It is possible they may support you in paying a translator, but you may need to pay them yourself.

Provide support for the translator.

Depending on the research you are doing and the organization you are working with, you may see or hear experiences, realities, and stories that are difficult and deeply upsetting. Recognize

that your position and identity is different from that of the translator's; as a foreigner, you are more removed, both physically and in terms of identity, from the people you will be interviewing. The translator will hear difficult stories and experiences directly from those sharing them, while you will hear them all through the translator. Be aware of the impact this could have on the translator, and make sure they can talk with you if they are upset. Be prepared to ask supervisors for help if you think the translator needs support beyond that which you can give. Just as the wellbeing of the people you are interviewing should be a priority, the wellbeing of the translator should also be a priority.



Exchange knowledge with the translator. The translator can be a great source of information, especially when it comes to social norms and cultural differences. Establish a friendship with them! Discuss ethical guidelines, mindset, and research approach with the translator as well, to ensure that you are on the same page and both acting upon the same ethical principles.



Support skills acquisition for the translator.

Translating effectively is hard work, heavy responsibility, and requires skills and training to be done well! Discuss training with your supervisors ahead of time. The reality is that it may fall on you to provide any necessary

training and you should draw on resources around you to do so. This may include experienced translators who are willing to share a couple hours of their time, your supervisors, or basic 'how-to' guides on the internet.

Interviewing

Interact with participants as a human being having a conversation with another human being, not as researcher focused only on getting information. Try to make conversations and



interactions as organic and natural as possible (not having forms to sign helps). Be open, vulnerable, curious, compassionate and friendly. This helps the researcher, the translator and the respondent feel much more comfortable. Aim to build a relationship even though it is short term.

Make conversations with respondents a two-way street. You will be asking people to share information about themselves, their lives, and their experiences. Be a good listener. You can also share about your life and your experiences when appropriate! People were often interested to hear about me beyond my research-related interests, and I quickly learned that it was okay and even beneficial to reciprocate that genuine curiosity.

You can often gauge the best and most appropriate topics of casual conversation based on the questions that people ask you.

Ask open-ended interview questions. I suggest keeping interviews semi-structured, and steering clear of ‘yes’ or ‘no’ survey questions. This gives people room to share what they want to share, and allows them to direct the conversation.

Sit at the same level. With interviews, we were welcomed into homes with kindness and generosity. People shared chai and snacks with us, and offered seats on beds or on chairs while they sat on the floor. It is best to graciously accept food or drinks when someone takes the time to prepare and share, but the translator always insisted that we sit on the floor with the people we were interviewing, and I learned to do the same. This helps create a more friendly and comfortable



environment, rather than reinforcing positions of power and a feeling of ‘researcher vs researched.’

Compensation

Consider payment for interviews. The respondents we spoke with were interrupting their days

(either halting their work or using up minimal relaxation time) to speak with us. You may feel they deserve compensation for this, and it is always an option to pay participants for their time. It is important to first consider the impact of monetary compensation (on the participant and within the larger community) and to discuss this as well as specific details (how much should you pay?) with field supervisors and field animators.



Give gifts or food. Carrying packages of snacks to give to children in the settlements, or bringing food to share during interviews is appreciated, and may be less challenging than arranging monetary compensation.

Offer to help out with tasks. If successful, this can help make up for time that participants have lost because of the interview. We often drove respondents to places they needed to be after the interview, or helped them to complete tasks that had been interrupted, such as packing snack bags to sell. Try to identify options for helping



ahead of time. However, what you think is helpful may not actually be helpful. Ask participants directly what you can do to help.

Sharing results

Design results in an accessible format. Remember that the priority here is the people you are working with, so you should aim to format the results to ensure that they are meaningful and accessible to the participants. If you are able to create something that can serve as a resource for



the communities in which you worked, do this instead of writing a paper. Papers or reports may be preferred by academics but are largely inaccessible to many of those you may be interviewing, and are also difficult for first-time researchers to write. Think about how you will present results ahead of time because it is challenging to come up with an impactful way to present research at the last minute. Do not be afraid to think outside the box: the research presentation format could be

a community-based meeting, or activity for example.

Share results with your participants. Ongoing collaboration and transparent communication throughout the research process is an important part of participatory research. This means that the research is not complete until you have shared the findings with those who shared their knowledge and experiences with you in the first place. Doing so also has the potential to help facilitate discussions among community members. Make sure you schedule this sharing in as part of the research.



Discuss sharing results with field animators. Are there other people or key stakeholders who could benefit from discussions surrounding the research topic and findings? Involving field animators throughout the process is important. Although they are not your supervisors and will not be directing you, they work closely with the communities, and therefore know them well and the issues they face. If they have time and are willing, discuss the research with them from start through to finish. They will likely have good, realistic insights that will help you to carry out ethical, effective and respectful research.



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Not pictured: Suman and Bhavna.

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