

RESEARCH ETHICS CASE STUDIES

2. RESEARCHER WELLBEING & INTERNATIONAL FIELDWORK

Editor: Jodie Pennacchia

Annotated with references to: BERA (2018). *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* (4th ed.).
<https://www.bera.ac.uk/ethical-guidelines-2018>

About this series

BERA's Research Ethics Case Studies series presents illustrative case studies designed to complement BERA's *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*, fourth edition (2018) by giving concrete examples of how those guidelines can be applied during the research process.

For a full account of ethical best-practice as recommended by BERA we suggest that researchers refer to our *Ethical Guidelines*, which these case studies are intended to illustrate without themselves offering guidance or recommendations.

Annotations in the right-hand margin of this document indicate where, among the numbered paragraphs of BERA's *Ethical Guidelines*, readers can find our full advice on the issues raised (hyperlinks to the relevant passages are included).

Background

Sonya has been appointed to her first academic role since completing her doctorate: a 12-month post working as a research fellow at a research-intensive university on a comparative study of rural schools across Europe. The project team is large and dispersed, including research fellows based at three other universities. Each has responsibility for fieldwork in a particular country, and Sonya will be visiting schools in Spain. The principal investigator (PI) overseeing Sonya's work is a professor of sociology who is also overseeing a number of other large projects.

The PI is impressed by Sonya's PhD research, which included fieldwork in Spanish schools, and describes Sonya as an ideal fit for this post, which will come with a high level of autonomy. Sonya is thrilled to have secured

this job, and believes it will help her to advance her career in academia.

Once Sonya begins her role she discovers she will be immersed in the first fieldwork site for two weeks, staying with a local family and visiting two rural schools, where her main contact will be the headteacher. Sonya is a native English-speaker but can speak intermediate Spanish; staying with the family is intended to support her language development for future project visits and the presentation of research findings (73). The PI asks Sonya to document her observations and interactions with the local community in order to build up a better understanding of the educational and wider social context of the community.

BERA Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (4th edition), paragraph 73:

'Where research is conducted in international settings in which English is not the prevalent language, researchers should seek to make the fruits of their research available in a language that makes it locally as well as internationally accessible.'

See also **paragraph 83**.

The ethical dilemma

Sonya becomes concerned about her own wellbeing during her fieldwork. While she is able to catch the school bus each morning with students, she often misses it on the way home because teachers are only able to meet with her at the end of the school day. Getting taxis has also proven difficult due to the community's rural location. Sonya typically finds herself waiting, on her own, at dusk, for a sporadic community bus, which makes her feel anxious about her safety (84). She considers hiring a car, but needs her PI's permission to do so as she does not know whether this has been budgeted for. She also worries that raising this issue will make her appear less capable, and is uncomfortable about sharing concerns and vulnerabilities so early in her relationship with the PI.

Paragraph 84 reflects on safeguarding duties, and the importance of the physical and psychological wellbeing of researchers, particularly when undertaking fieldwork.

A separate issue is that the family Sonya is staying with insist that, as their guest, she eats with them every night. From previous visits to Spain she knows that this is an important show of hospitality (22). Her hosts invite local people over for meals so that Sonya can meet them, and these meals often run on until late in the evening, which means that Sonya has very little time to herself to relax, speak with relatives or sleep.

Paragraph 22 discusses the importance of adaptability and sensitivity to research undertaken in different cultural contexts.

By the end of the first week Sonya feels exhausted and isolated (84). Furthermore, she finds fulfilling her PI's request to compile fieldnotes about the community, which she can only do at the end of each very long day, increasingly burdensome. Sonya does not fully understand the purpose of this part of the study – it is not detailed in the original job description or research bid. However, she notes that it is relevant to another of the PI's projects, which is about rural community life in Spain.

Paragraph 84 (see page 2)

These issues compound one another: the more Sonya tries to ensure that she gathers the necessary data while being appropriately polite, grateful and culturally respectful of her participants, the more she feels isolated, anxious about her safety and concerned that she is not going to make a success of the project.

Course of action

Sonya finally decides to email her PI to raise the travel issue, but she receives an out-of-office response informing her that her PI is away doing fieldwork. By the time she receives a response, two days later, Sonya has only three days of this two-week phase of fieldwork left. In a succinct email, the PI suggests that she finishes the fieldwork early, but Sonya worries about the impact this would have on her relationship with the PI and so decides to stay the course.

When they next meet the PI is very sympathetic with Sonya's concerns, and asks how they can improve the fieldwork experience for next time. They have a full debrief and plan for the next trip. They agree that Sonya will hire a car for the duration, and reside with a local family for only half of the visit, staying in a hotel for the remainder of it. These arrangements will be clearly explained to the family in advance, to allay any concerns about appearing rude or ungrateful of hospitality. They also ensure that Sonya has other senior contacts within the team who she can speak to when the PI is busy. A project-wide buddy system, whereby research fellows text to say they have safely arrived at and left research sites, is extended to include regular phonecalls between team members

in which any issues can be discussed as they arise. The PI suggests that she and Sonya have a debrief after each phase of fieldwork, and that Sonya keeps a diary to help her with some of the emotional dynamics and experiences of fieldwork.

Overall, Sonya is glad that she said something, although she remains concerned about being perceived as less capable and worries about whether this might affect the extent to which the PI will support her to publish from the project (85). The PI mentioned how useful and interesting she found Sonya's fieldnotes on the wider community. For now, Sonya decides not to question this further, despite her lack of clarity about the purpose of this ongoing strand of the fieldwork, and how difficult she found it to find time for it alongside writing up her school visits and accepting the hospitality of her hosts.

Paragraph 85 specifies that employers and sponsors should not exploit 'differences in the conditions of work and roles of other researchers, including student researchers and those on time-limited contracts', and that 'employers are also responsible for supporting researchers' personal and professional career development'.

Alternative courses of action

With regards to traveling back from the school, Sonya could have asked a member of staff to wait with her or give her a lift. However, the schools are very short-staffed, with staff asked to cover multiple functions, so she did not feel it was ethical to impose a further burden on staff as a result of their involvement in the research (6; 34).

Paragraph 6 advises researchers to weigh up the potential, often conflicting benefits and harms that may stem from research.

Paragraph 34 reflects on the importance of researchers not making excessive demands on participants, and of thinking through their duty of care to participants.

To overcome her fatigue, Sonya could have checked into a hotel for the final few days of her fieldwork, allowing her to complete her work while benefiting from more downtime. However, as well lacking clarity on what had been budgeted for, she was concerned that this would have offended the family she was staying with – even if she hadn't told them she was going to a hotel, the town was small enough that it was likely they would have found out from other sources. Furthermore, being embedded with the family was crucial to compiling the fieldnotes about the wider community that the PI stressed her interest in, and Sonya did not want to disappoint her so early on in the project (85). This is also the reason why Sonya continues to feel unable to question the additional community fieldwork

Paragraph 85 (see above).

strand, despite the fact that an explanation of its purpose would be useful to her, and she does not understand whether or how consent has been, or should be, given for it (8).

Paragraph 8 defines 'voluntary informed and ongoing consent', and how it should be secured and reaffirmed.

Much of what Sonya learned during her first trip, and the new process agreed with her PI and the wider research team, are put into action on subsequent fieldwork trips. Sonya sees the benefit of having a thorough debrief after each fieldwork trip, and she starts to keep a diary.

Conclusions

- Fieldwork can be tiring and overwhelming, particularly when it is immersive. Researcher wellbeing is an important issue, whether the researcher is working as part of a team or individually. It is important that researchers have appropriate time to maintain their own wellbeing and personal relationships, have time away from their researcher role, and have a contact within their research teams with whom they can discuss issues or concerns. When researchers are working alone it is important that they always have a contact they can reach should issues or concerns arise.
- Conducting research in other countries and/or cultures may require a researcher to adopt a particular role, or to engage in social encounters in particular ways, as part of a show of cultural sensitivity and respect.
- Even when a proper risk assessment has been carried out, issues arise in the course of fieldwork that cannot always be predicted, such as the need for Sonya to regularly stay late at the schools and her consequent travel difficulties. Being able to adapt and seek advice are important when a lone researcher is doing fieldwork, particularly in another country where options may be less familiar.

Questions

1. Did Sonya find the right compromise between looking after her own wellbeing, being concerned for her participants, being receptive to hospitality and progressing the study?
2. Were Sonya's concerns regarding travel and safety valid? Did they suggest, for instance, that she may not have been sufficiently experienced to undertake this fieldwork?
3. Should the PI have done more to prepare Sonya ahead of her first phase of fieldwork? What might this additional preparation have included?
4. Did the PI's responses to the issues Sonya raised do enough to address them?
5. Should Sonya have questioned why she was gathering the additional data on the local community as part of this project? What might have been the consequences of initiating this discussion?

Further reading

Angervall, J. & Gustafsson, J. (2014). Becoming an academic researcher. *Policy Futures in Education*, 12(2), 191–199.

Arts & Humanities Research Council (no date). *AHRC Research Training Framework – Early Career Researchers*. Retrieved from <https://ahrc.ukri.org/documents/guides/research-training-framework-for-early-career-researchers/>

Bloor, M., Fincham, B. & Sampson, H. (2007). *Qualiti (NCRM) commissioned inquiry into the risk to well-being of researchers in qualitative research*. <http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/407/1/CIReport.pdf>

Caretta, M. A., Drozdowski, D., Jokinen, J. C., & Falconer E. (2018). "Who can play this game?" The lived experiences of doctoral candidates and early career women in the neoliberal university. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 42(2), 261–275. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03098265.2018.1434762>

Iphofen, R. (2013). *Research Ethics in Ethnography/Anthropology*. Brussels & Luxembourg City: European Commission. Retrieved from http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/other/hi/ethics-guide-ethnog-anthrop_en.pdf

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British Educational Research Association (BERA)
9–11 Endsleigh Gardens
London WC1H 0EH
www.bera.ac.uk | @BERANews

