

# Ethics in Development Research: 'Doing No Harm' to Research Staff when Conducting Research in the Global South

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# Overview

1 Motivation

2 Methods

3 Findings

4 Conclusion

# Motivation for this Paper

- Data collection ("field research") in LMICs has increased rapidly in recent years.
  1. Greater popularity of/increase in RCTs
  2. Call for evidence-based (development) policy making
- Existing research ethics guidelines focused on the protection of human subjects
  1. Nuremberg Code (1947)
  2. Declaration of Helsinki (1964)
  3. Belmont Report (1978) outlining three fundamental principles:  
**respect, justice, beneficence**
- Crucial gap in current ethics guidelines: **well-being and safety of research staff remained a blind spot in the discussion so far**
- Why should we care ?
  1. Moral obligation in and of itself - defines the ethical integrity of a project
  2. Affects interactions relations with research participants/trust in target communities
  3. Affects data quality

# Previous Work

- **Systematic review** of social science literature discussing ethical challenges experienced by research staff (Steinert et al., 2021; Kaplan et al., 2020)
- Screened 23,151 titles and abstracts & included 183 studies
- Key finding: **data collection in LMICs can have harmful consequences for involved research staff:**
  1. Threats to physical and emotional well-being
  2. Precarious employment conditions
  3. Intellectual exploitation
- Most included papers from fields of anthropology, ethnology, and global health; very little from (development) economics

# Previous Work

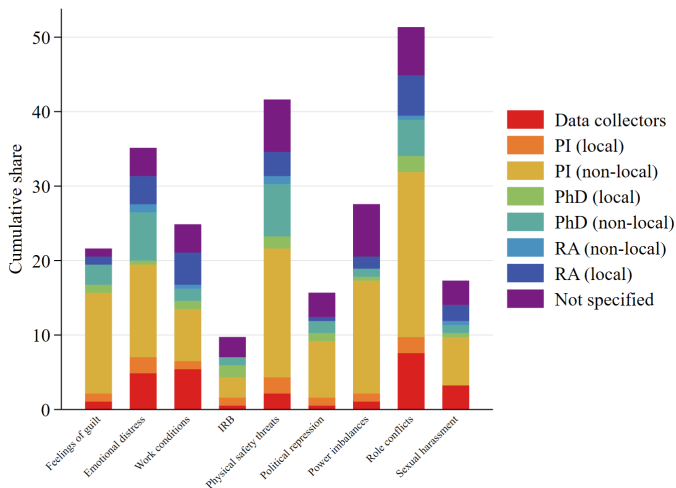


FIGURE 1: Ethical challenges and affected research staff

# Contribution of this Paper

- Research gaps highlighted by Systematic Review:
  1. Perspectives of research staff on lower hierarchical levels underrepresented (possible publication bias)
  2. Little systematic investigation of contexts and set-ups leading to ethics failures
- Key contributions of this paper:
  1. **Qualitative interviews** with research staff at all hierarchical levels (including enumerators, field managers, translators, etc.) and in various countries
  2. Focus on contextual and structural challenges and linkages with ethical failures
  3. Empirical investigation of possible solutions
  4. Development of a conceptual framework
- Findings may help to better safeguard research staff collecting data in LMICs

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# Data and Analysis

- **60 semi-structured qualitative interviews** with research staff representing different hierarchies, institutions, geographic regions
- Interview guides focused on the (i) challenges and (ii) failures at different stages of data collection, and (iii) potential solutions
- Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim
- Transcripts were coded in *ATLAS.ti* using qualitative content analysis
- Categories were defined a priori based on systematic review and further revised through induction during coding

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## Definitions

- **Ethical challenges:** characteristics of the general academic/institutional structure, the target country, or the specific project and project staff, which can induce harmful conditions for research staff
- **Ethical failures:** situations in which unethical practices towards research staff can be observed
- **Solutions:** rules and strategies that could mitigate ethical failures or directly address challenges as the root causes of ethical failures

# Conceptual Framework



FIGURE 2: Conceptual Framework: Challenges and Failures

# Conceptual Framework: Ethical Challenges

## ETHICAL CHALLENGES

### Structural level

- Funding restrictions
- Power asymmetries between Global North and South institutions/ researchers
- Weak institution/ lack of legal frameworks
- Academic incentive structures
- Shortcomings of IRBs

### Target country level

- Insecurity, crime, violence
- High poverty and deprivation
- Authoritarian political systems

### Project- and individual level

- Informal employment arrangements
- Collection of sensitive data
- Cultural differences/ inter-cultural communication gaps
- Positionality/ role conflicts
- Doubts on the research purposes

## ETHICAL FAILURES

- Exploitative work conditions
- Emotional distress
- Physical harm
- Sexual harassment
- Political repression
- Blurred professional boundaries
- Lack of acknowledgment in scientific outputs
- Disrespectful treatment

# Conceptual Framework: Ethical Challenges

## ■ Structural level

- *"IRBs in the West might not be very well prepared for research in development settings" (14).*
- *"We also had a language barrier with the research assistants. And a huge power imbalance between us and them." (128)*
- *"I am talking about Congo especially... I mean our government does not provide means for research. So, there is not budget. Universities and research centres suffer from that. And they have to rely on funding coming from Europe, the US and so on." (154)*

## ■ Target country level

- *"There is always a constant element of insecurity that is lurking around the researchers all the time. Especially, when they are out in the field." (118)*
- *"So, it can rain pretty heavily and all these slum areas are not/ their infrastructure is not that good." (124)*

## ■ Project/individual level

- *"Enumerators are paid little and work under short time schedules." (157)*
- *"There is a very thin line between a researcher and an activist I think." (153)*
- *"There are many things that I have assessed incorrectly. Simply because I evaluated them from my own cultural background." (117)*

# Conceptual Framework: Ethical Failures

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# Conceptual Framework: Ethical Failures

## ■ Exploitative Work Conditions

- *"I never got any contract, any written contract. Never." (I54)*
- *"But there would be times when you would be out from 5:00 in the morning and the coming back, it is 8:00, 9:00pm. And you know, you are not being given any overtime [...]." (I58)*

## ■ Emotional Distress

- *"Knowing that this [beaten by husband] was an impact of the questions that I asked her does leave a deep mark" (I53)*
- *"But I think by the time I was speaking to her, I was so unwell that I would basically just like weep the entire time. So I think for me, there was a serious impact on my mental health." (I39)*
- *"I have a personal trauma, because all these people (...) tell their very deep stories about their own personal lives (...) a lot of my qualitative interviews, which I am doing end up with the person crying. And me crying."*

## ■ Physical Harm

- *"There was the car accident, there was the attempted hijacking. And she was so terrified by that." (I39)*
- *"But sometimes, risks come fast. And is unpredictable. So, we had very, very few cases of one enumerator who got slapped in the face." (I30)*

# Conceptual Framework: Ethical Failures

## ■ Sexual Harassment

- *"But we are like/ what we realized with my student during this work in Uganda, that she could not do the work without being sexually harassed."* (150)

## ■ Political Repression

- *"Because they are European or American they are fairly protected against sort of a crack-down by security services. They could be kicked out of the country but you are not going to get arrested or tortured. But this does not extent to local informants who might get sort of harassed by police."* (141)

## ■ Blurred Professional Boundaries

- *"For example, one of my participants during this research called for money (...) And I did not even inform anyone that she had asked me about 30.000 rupees."* (139)
- *"The community members are still calling to ask whether there are more [in-kind transfer to treatment group] that are coming. Because they felt left out."* (156)

## ■ Lack of Acknowledgment

- *"And then the institution that collected the data goes back to write the paper and publishes it. So, maybe if there is a report, the persons, they might be on the report but when they write the actual paper that is published, it only has the Western researchers on it." (I45)*
- *"I just got money but then I work a lot on this but then my name was not there. Sometimes, I feel a bit kind of 'why do you have to put so much energy on that while you are not being mentioned.'" (I11)*

## ■ Disrespect

- *"Even PIs from the Global South would sometimes be treated like research assistants" (I57).*
- *"I was accused of stealing money [...]. If I was a white person [...] it would have never happened that way. So, the way that they treated me, they would have never treated an international that way." (I40)*

## POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

### Structural level

- Changes in funding structures
- Extension of ethics guidelines to comprise protection of research staff

### Project- and individual level

- Formalise and improve employment conditions (e.g. insurance, contracts, wages, etc.)
- Involvement of local partners at all project stages
- Capacity building for research team members
- Scientific acknowledgement of local partners
- Adoption of safety protocols, security training
- Adoption of referral protocols and structures
- Provision of emotional support/counselling for research team members
- Sufficient preparation/preparatory field visits
- Clear communication with external partners
- Strengthening internal team structures
- Professionalisation of project structures

FIGURE 3: Conceptual Framework: Solutions

# Conceptual Framework: Solutions

## ■ Structural Level

- *"And I also think that there are a lot of solutions that donors can provide and that do not require them to sort of do larger checks but actually they could have their own sort of insurance pot of money that to conduct their research ethically." (I52)*
- *"If sort of Ethics Reviews Boards were also involved in reviewing budgets and seeing how much of the budget allocation was put aside for staff wellbeing, benefits. And not just thinking about wellbeing like meditation classes or yoga classes but also like benefits, sick days, leave, things like that. Maternity leave." (I39)*

## ■ Project/Individual Level

- *"Also a safety protocol: how to act when you don't feel safe, what to wear, what situations can make you feel unsafe. And this protocol has been evolving with projects over time." (I51)*
- *"We need support by a professional person taking care of the emotional and material needs of respondents" (I1)*
- *"A full and comprehensive training of staff is very important. It is important for us training to talk about not only measurement issues and how to properly and consistently measure items when we are collecting data, but again talk about the safety and security protocols while moving around in the field." (I37)*

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# Wider Project

- **Ongoing: Quantitative survey** on experiences of research staff at multiple levels
  - Feel free to participate yourselves & share the link within your networks:  
<https://survey.academiccloud.de/index.php/881989?lang=en>

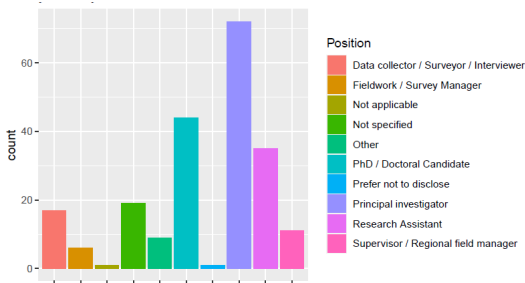


FIGURE 4: Survey participants to date

- **Planned: Experimental evaluation** of several light-touch interventions to better protect research staff

# Conclusion

- Most comprehensive evidence to date on the multiple ethical failures faced by research staff across hierarchies, countries, institutions
- Poverty, safety risks, power asymmetries in academia, and ad-hoc nature of research projects create fertile ground for ethical failures to occur
- Possible solutions need to address both structural- as well as project-level factors
- Our findings call for an **extension of existing ethics guidelines and ethics appendices** (Asiedu, Karlan, Lambon-Quayefio, Udry, 2021)