



Practical Ethics in Social Research with Children and Families in Young Lives: A longitudinal study of childhood poverty in Ethiopia, Andhra Pradesh (India), Peru and Vietnam

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Abstract

A great deal of attention is now paid to the ethics of social research. Research governance has expanded, and a burgeoning literature describes the processes, practices and questions that arise in social research with children, families and communities. This paper outlines the approach taken to research ethics within Young Lives, a longitudinal study of childhood poverty in Ethiopia, Andhra Pradesh (India), Peru and Vietnam, co-ordinated by a research team based in the UK. Drawing on fieldwork reports, qualitative data and other material, I offer some 'real life' examples of ethics questions encountered in research, providing insights into the experiences of fieldworkers. The paper emphasises the importance of understanding local contexts in undertaking research with children and families in environments that change rapidly, economically, environmentally and politically. Overall, my aim is to contribute to current debates about research practices, the ethics of longitudinal research with children, and research with children and parents in developing countries.

Keywords: Young Lives, Ethics, Developing countries, Research with children and families, Longitudinal research, Childhood poverty.

Introduction

Young Lives is a longitudinal study of childhood poverty, involving 12,000 children over 15 years in Ethiopia, the state of Andhra Pradesh in India, Peru and Vietnam. Two cohorts of children – a younger cohort who were born in 2001-2 and an older cohort born in 1994-5 – are followed. The aim of Young Lives is to gain a deeper understanding of the intergenerational transmission of poverty, and how a range of social policies affect children's lives. It also aims to inform the development and implementation of policies and practices that will reduce childhood poverty. Regular questionnaire-based surveys are conducted with all the children and their carers every three years (see www.younglives.org.uk). Qualitative research with a nested sample of children (25 in each cohort in each country) uses interviews, group discussions and other creative methods with the children, their parents, teachers, community representatives and others, to explore children's well-being, their aspirations, their experiences of school and other services, within the context of their changing communities (see Crivello et al., 2013). Young Lives takes a positive view of ethics as enabling high-quality research, respecting the key principles of justice, respect and avoiding harm. The study raises many ethics questions, and this paper describes some of the challenges Young Lives encounters, as a starting

point for identifying more fundamental ethics questions that arise in maintaining long-term research relationships.

This paper aims to contribute to current debates about research practices, the ethics of longitudinal research with children, parents and others in situations of poverty, in the spirit of shared enquiry. Since I first wrote about ethics in relation to the Young Lives study (Morrow 2009), a burgeoning literature focussing on research with children and young people in developing countries has appeared¹. This paper updates and expands upon our experiences, now that we have undertaken three rounds of qualitative data collection, and draws on new literature.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first describes the background to Young Lives ethics approach/processes. The second section explores the importance of understanding local contexts and cultures in research in situations of poverty. The third section focuses on understandings and expectations held by research participants and describes how fieldworkers have attempted to resolve difficulties. The paper concludes that an up-to-date understanding of local context is fundamental to explanation of how children and adults respond to being involved in research.

Background to Young Lives research ethics

Young Lives initial research (2000) was reviewed at proposal stage by a university Research Ethics Committee at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. Questionnaires were piloted in South Africa in 2001-2, and were approved by the Rand Afrikaans University. Save the Children child protection protocols (2003) were (and still are) used for fieldworkers. When the Young Lives study moved to Oxford University in 2006, ethics approval was obtained from University of Oxford Social Science Division Ethics Committee, as well as research ethics committees in Peru (IIN) and Vietnam. Research ethics approval is sought at each round of data collection for any changes made to research instruments and comments from RECs are addressed. Van Teijlingen and Simkhada (2012) recommend that researchers undertaking social research seek local approval, as Young Lives has done, where possible. Research ethics committees are increasingly available in developing countries, although they mostly (but not always) are focused on health research. Within Young Lives, ethics are discussed with the qualitative, quantitative and policy teams, with the aim of developing a shared understanding. This is a complex task, involving differing academic traditions and disciplines (economists, educationalists, social anthropologists, developmental psychologists, epidemiologists, nutritionists, social workers, sociologists and political scientists), and differing power dynamics within and between research teams and communities studied. Working with in-country teams may reduce 'stranger involvement', but it does not negate it altogether, as there are stark social differences between researchers and respondents. These include social class differences – with professional researchers of a higher social class interacting with participants living in poverty, as well as social divisions along the lines of gender, ethnicity and caste. This is in addition to the obvious power differential of age, with researchers conducting research with children as young as six years old. Furthermore, there are differing understandings of children in each country, reflecting cultural, religious, and social constructions of childhood. Whilst these are not discussed here, it is important to recognise that such understandings are likely to affect research participation (see, for example, Twum-Danso 2009).

Ethics is a systematic part of research documentation within Young Lives. Initially, ethics approaches were developed collaboratively with the country research teams. Following piloting of the qualitative research in 2007, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for fieldworkers was developed in collaboration with research teams, setting out basic guidance about research procedures and respectful communication with research participants (see www.younglives.org.uk). The MOU is also used with the survey teams; all fieldworkers undergo training in research ethics, and fieldwork manuals contain detailed ethics guidance.

Ethics questions can differ between the quantitative and qualitative research processes, in so far as qualitative research may allow more time to build trust and to learn about respondents' concerns, and so on. The implications for the survey research also need to be considered, because the relationship between the two components of the study may not be obvious for families and children involved, especially as the survey round and qualitative research take place several months apart. Some of the ethics questions Young Lives contends with are specific to, or more problematic in longitudinal research, as research relationships have to be sustained over time, and informed consent has to be renewed.

Ethics difficulties are systematically recorded by survey researchers and qualitative research teams. Fieldworkers are required to report any cases that give cause for concern to their supervisors, who will try to resolve the situation. Supervisors also bring questions to the attention of the lead researchers, who discuss what to do. In some cases, direct help has been provided to a family, but mostly people are directed to specific services or sources of advice. In Peru, the local ethics committee (of IIN) is also informed of specific cases. Within the qualitative research, difficulties are systematically recorded in data-gathering reports (Ames 2009; Streuli 2011; Tafere et al. 2009, 2011; Truong 2009; Vu, 2011; and Vennam 2009, 2011). Thus, Young Lives has a considerable amount of data relating to research ethics available for analysis.

Informed consent is sought and recorded at each round of fieldwork, at each session or activity, and ideally again at the end of the session in relation to how data will be used, and anticipated participation in future activities. In some countries, informed consent is voice recorded, because people are unwilling to sign documents. Where appropriate, researchers provide contact details of the research teams and detailed leaflets that they can read out to ensure minimum standards of information. Within the qualitative research, there is a constant process of attempting to check participants' understandings of their involvement. However, as the next section of the paper shows, this is not straightforward.

Context matters

As understanding of the differing contexts in which Young Lives takes place helps to explain how research ethics operate in practice. In relation to informed consent, teams have grappled with obtaining consent from children. For example, there has been discussion about whether to seek children's consent before parents' consent and out of earshot of the parents. As noted in a Young Lives training session for qualitative researchers:

Children are much more likely to really say what they want then. Some fieldworkers might use this method, while others might feel it is not culturally appropriate to talk first to the child. This is suggested during the training. But whatever they chose, all fieldworkers will run through the entire consent procedure with all children. They also explain consent in 'child friendly' terms, and they practise beforehand with an experienced researcher. (Vu, personal communication)

However, it can be difficult to ensure privacy for children, and parents often want to be with their children when they are interviewed, as I discuss below. Ahsan (2009) also discusses the difficulties of maintaining privacy and confidentiality in her research with children in Bangladesh, and Abebe (2009) explores how expecting 'privacy' in his research with children Ethiopia was awkward.

Consent is understood to be an on-going process. As a fieldworker in Vietnam noted:

This is in fact very similar to our fieldwork practice during which local people ask lots of questions about us as researchers and the research and we always take time and interest not only to satisfy their curiosity but also to get their feedback about the research itself. In our view, this practice is necessary

to ensure mutual reflexivity and thus an inherent part of a community based or action research or indeed any anthropological research.

While attrition rates are very low in the quantitative survey², in the second round of qualitative research in Ethiopia, an Older Cohort boy (age 13) declined to participate, despite his parents' willingness. The boy's father speculated that his son 'had heard a rumour from his friends that Young Lives has a mission to convert children to Protestantism' (Taferé et al 2009: p9). This shows that there are differences in views between parents and children, and that children's views about participation are respected in a context in which children are usually expected to obey their elders.

In the third round of qualitative research in Peru (2011), one of the older cohort girls had a baby, and agreed to be interviewed, but declined to participate in group methods, because of her responsibilities at home. Similarly in Vietnam, a girl had given birth just before the arrival of the research team. According to local customs, strangers were not allowed to enter the house nor to talk with her, so interviews were conducted with her husband and her mother. Older cohort children are mobile in Peru, and it has not only become increasingly difficult to locate some of them, but also to persuade them to participate in some or all of the activities. These examples indicate the need to respect not only local norms but also individuals' decisions about participation in research.

Despite clear explanations, in some communities, research teams have found that there are widely differing conceptions about the purpose of the research, and people ask for help. These are usually locally specific, linked to a history of interventions, and difficult to modify. For example, in Ethiopia, the interviewer asked the caregiver of a younger cohort girl if she had any questions or suggestions:

Caregiver: What I want to request is that if you have something to help me for her education. Maybe if you have something to help me, especially the payment.

Interviewer: Do you recall at the beginning of the interview, you were told about the objective of the study?

Caregiver: Yes.

Interviewer: Its main objective is not to help children in their current situation. However, it is a study about their problems to get general solutions not only for this site, but for Ethiopia's children in general, by bringing about policy changes... It also tries to publicise the general results of the study to concerned bodies in order to know more about the lives of children. Thus, there will be changes in the future, but in the current situation we give exercise books for the time you spend with us. At the beginning we start the study telling you that we are not doing aid, rather we are conducting research. And it is to bring changes in the future.

In Peru, parents clearly associated Young Lives (which is called Niños del Milenio in Peru) with programmes and interventions. Even though fieldworkers explain that there are no material benefits other than gifts for their children (books and crayons), parents remain hopeful: 'Maybe one day you bring some help/benefit for us (laughter)... Maybe when he's studying, you [Young Lives] can help me with it' (Quechua-speaking caregiver).

Fieldworker: And your father approved of Niños del Milenio [Young Lives]?

Older Cohort boy: Yes, because he said it could bring some support.

In a group discussion with teachers in Peru, the fieldworker was asked about the purpose of Young Lives. The fieldworker started to explain, but was interrupted by another teacher, who mentioned that there was a problem with the programme Juntos (a government-run conditional cash transfer programme). He claimed that fieldworkers of Young Lives told him that all children who participate in the research will directly become beneficiaries of the Juntos programme. Other families confused Young Lives with non-governmental organisations (NGOs), such as one called Intervida, which sponsors children and communities.

In Ethiopia, a parent challenged the researchers, recalling previous experiences of local interventions:

I remember one time some people gathered us to tell us about the equality of men and women and we spent too much time in the meeting and they gave us 15 birr [nearly a day's agricultural wage], and they sent us home. I had a lot of things to do at home the whole time I sat there. They just talk about things that are not practical. Many of us were angry because there was no visible change in the last three or four years they came to our community. The aid must be fundamental and generous because living expenses are getting high. Just giving some money doesn't do [much] good for long.

The researcher then explained that Young Lives is a study and that he is not from the government. The parent replied:

I didn't mean to ask you for anything because you're not the government. It just sends you to make a study, and I understand.

Nonetheless, the idea that Young Lives is associated with the government remains. This perception is accurate Vietnam and Ethiopia, where government departments are involved in survey data collection. Further explanations may also lie in the use of a logo (NGOs tend to have logos, while research projects are somewhat less likely to) and also the earlier involvement of Save the Children (an international NGO) in Young Lives.

Young Lives is conducted across a wide geographical spread, in situations of poverty. Many respondents are illiterate or semi-literate (in the case of parents) or have basic literacy (in the case of children). Many sites are recipients of numerous governmental and non-governmental interventions³ that offer services and may sometimes make unrealistic promises. For example, Mosse (2007: p33), discussing pro-poor interventions in India, observed that development interventions 'can reaffirm structures of power', especially along caste lines.

While broad shared ethics practices are crucial, these need to be applied with some flexibility according to each context and situation that arises. This may change from one year to the next. For example, in one community in Peru, there seemed to be a decline in trust towards community-based organisations because of a previous incident involving the arrest of a local leader; following this incident, the community was unsettled and wary of outsiders (Ames 2009). When research teams visit, they are not going into neutral situations – situations are dynamic, and changes need careful research and documentation.

The next section explores in more depth understandings and expectations of research.

Expectations

The fact that people expect some benefits to come from their participation in Young Lives research does raise questions about consent being freely given. The survey asks detailed questions about household expenditure, and people living in poverty may understandably ask for help and money, especially when they want to use their limited time on activities that will bring them direct benefits. Furthermore, can, or should, people in poverty be expected to understand what 'research' is? In poor communities, any outsiders who are not government representatives providing services are likely to become the objects of speculation and thus it may

be difficult for people to distinguish research from intervention. One lesson from the Young Lives experience concerns the over-use of the word ‘project’. In one site in Vietnam:

both at provincial and local levels, the term ‘project’ has become loaded with expectations for material and financial benefits, sometimes an instant remuneration. A research project without direct material benefits like *Young Lives* requires significant efforts to explain itself against the grain. ... [We were warned] about this aspect quite early before the field research started. We later found [the] warning described the expectations of officials, teachers, education administrators and village cadres more closely than those of the ordinary people. (Chi Truong, personal communication)

Olivier de Sardan (2005: p179) discusses what happens when ‘development language comes into contact with a local language’, and observes that ‘projects have become privileged... as a language system’. He suggests that this is not so much a linguistic problem as a problem of translation. This may explain what is happening in Young Lives sites. Language may go some way to explaining why people construct Young Lives as potentially providing aid. In Ethiopia, however, Young Lives is known as a *tinat*, which means ‘study’. In Peru, the word *estudio* is used, which also translates as study. The word for research is avoided, because it can be translated as *investigación*, which may be confused with criminal investigation. Research teams emphasise that Young Lives is not an intervention or a programme evaluation. Peru teams do also use the word *proyecto* (project) in Spanish, or *proyectu* or *proyectupi* in Quecha, but this is followed by a description that explains that it is a study.

Fieldwork reports show that parents’ concerns can be allayed with careful explanations, and that research can be explained in locally relevant ways. Parents often ask why their children have been selected. For example, in Andhra Pradesh, in India, fieldworkers use the following explanation:

Now, let me explain why we have selected [your child] for the research. While cooking rice, you will take some grains and test whether it’s cooked or not. You will not check the whole rice. In the same way, we select some children to know how they are and to know about their lives, and to know how the lives of children are in [this community]. That’s why [your child] has been chosen.

However, research teams continue to report being asked about the benefits of their participation in the research:

We explained to them that there were not ‘direct’ or ‘concrete’ benefits, but that their views were important to inform policies and programmes that may affect them and their children. This time, it was not only the adults who asked about possible benefits, but even children from the younger cohort. For this reason, in the next round, we need to reflect on that and prepare a proper explanation that both children and families understand (Streuli 2011: p28).

Similarly in Andhra Pradesh, the question was asked ‘again and again, “what do we get by participating?” There was no refusal to participate, but the expectations of receiving some support for their children, some day, persist’ (Vennam 2011: p13).

Compensation or rewards – how do these relate to understanding Young Lives?

Compensating research participants raises complex ethics questions. The literature discussing research reciprocity, including paying respondents for participation and other forms of reciprocity, like providing refreshments, in developing countries is scanty. Vakaoti (2009) describes paying street children to participate in his research in Fiji, and Abebe (2009), in Ethiopia, describes how he paid street children and bought them food, and then found that children brought him gifts, shared their food with him, and invited him to their

houses. Bonnin (2010) discusses the fieldworkers' experiences in northern Vietnam of sharing food provided by very poor families, and ways they found to compensate, with gifts of rice.

Payments can be made to reimburse expenses; to compensate for time, inconvenience and possible discomfort; to show appreciation for participants' help; or to pay for people's help. Wendler et al. (2002) suggest a number of safeguards to reduce the chance that parents' and children's decisions to participate will be distorted by the offer of payment, including the following: an explicit justification for all incentives; ensuring payment to people who withdraw; careful consideration of cases where there is concern that people are consenting because of payment and not because they wish to take part; and developing a general policy on describing payments in the consent process.

Young Lives teams deals with compensation in ways that reflect local norms about the value of people's time, their willingness to undertake research activities 'for the common good', and the reality of poverty and not having the capacity to miss work to spend time talking with researchers. Some teams pay respondents, including children, for their participation. Others give gifts as a 'thank you'. Norms of reciprocity, and/or of doing what the government tells you, are likely to affect people's willingness to participate. However, paying respondents may cause confusion. In Ethiopia, children were encouraged to use the money to buy school materials. During the first round of qualitative research, the Ethiopian research team noted:

As people are very poor, the money given is seen as aid... rather than an amount to compensate their time. That has brought some confusion between people being willing to participate and participating just for getting something out of it. Much effort has been exerted to tell people that *Young Lives* was a research project rather than an aid agency, but we feel that more energy is needed in future research. (Tafere et al. 2009: p10).

This improved for the second round of qualitative research. The fieldworker notes record:

We guided our field researchers to discuss with both the local officials and community members that *Young Lives* does not provide any aid to the community in general and to the research households in particular. The discussion with these groups were fruitful and, as a result, we managed to convince them that this is research studying childhood poverty to make suggestions about child-related policies to the government (Tafere et al 2009: p11).

In Andhra Pradesh, India, research teams have provided resources to schools as requested by local community leaders to benefit all children in the locality. Streuli (2010) noted that during her fieldwork in the Peruvian highlands with 7 and 8 year old children, that when she provided children with lunch and other refreshments, they carefully wrapped up the leftovers and took them home. The next day, they came prepared with plastic boxes to take any more leftovers, reflecting not only local norms about children contributing, sharing food, but also that reciprocity was very important to families.

Paying people for interviews may be coercive, and may conflict with ideas of informed consent being freely given, especially in poor areas (Head 2009, Creed-Kanashiro et al. 2005). There is a counter-argument that omitting to make payments (or gift-giving) is unethical. Ethics guidelines tend to suggest that 'fair return should be made for help and services' (ASA 2011: p6). The question of remuneration has also changed over time, as economies have become more marketised. For example, in Andhra Pradesh, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, which pays household members at least Rs.100/- (the equivalent of 75 pence in UK sterling) for a morning's work, has been implemented. People are now aware of the financial value of their time and fieldworkers report that they seem more likely to expect monetary compensation. Thus the decision was made in 2009 to compensate respondents in subsequent survey rounds. Despite this, fieldworkers report that it is increasingly difficult to persuade people to participate. In the third round of qualitative

research in Andhra Pradesh, older cohort children (then aged 16) were paid compensation of Rs. 150/- instead of being given gifts. However, while some caregivers were happy about their children receiving money, others mentioned that they preferred gifts, as children kept them carefully and proudly showed them to visitors (Vennam 2011). In Vietnam, Vu (2011: p12) explained:

research teams gave each case study child and his/her family a gift worth 3 dollars and felt the children and families took our gifts as tokens of our appreciation of their willingness to support us. We felt, though, that some families, and some programme contact persons in two sites expected much more financial help from the research teams. The fieldwork teams recommend that Young Lives clearly articulates what children, families, and community members could expect from their involvement in the research.

This is not to suggest that people should not be paid when they most need it – after all, the duress to accept monetary incentives is created by poverty, not by the incentives. Rather, care has to be exercised, and researchers must be aware that it may be difficult for people living in poverty to refuse requests to participate.

Child protection and parents' fears

In some Young Lives sites, parents have been fearful about what might happen to their children, and some of which relate to child protection concerns. In Ethiopia, for example, qualitative research teams have found that parents believe their children might be taken abroad (to America) to be educated, and some felt worried about this. Other studies note similar experiences. Nyambetha (2008), in a long-term study with orphans in Western Kenya, found that each time he visited, people expected him to 'take' the orphans away. One mother in Young Lives in Ethiopia preferred to stay with her child during the interview, and later revealed that she was guarding her child because she feared that he might be taken abroad for adoption. Research teams consequently reassure parents and other adults that children will not be taken away.

In Peru, newspapers frequently report kidnapping of children, in the context of hostility to inter-country adoptions. In a discussion with local authority workers in Peru, someone mentioned rumours that Young Lives were going to take children away, to which the fieldworker responded:

Fieldworker: It is good that you're mentioning this because, as the authorities, it is good that you're informed. As I say, this is a study that aims to learn from reality so that problems can be solved. ... In this project, no one is going to take none of the children, no way are we taking them away from their homes. In fact, what we want is to see how they grow up in their homes, how some improve and others not, and the reasons why some make progress and other not...

Professional: Are you all Peruvians?

Fieldworker: Everyone, we are all as Peruvian as the yucca [cassava] and potatoes!

This is a positive reflection of the research relationship and it seems that people feel they can express fears to fieldworkers. While there are different versions of child abduction myths, underlying them may be similar ideas about powerful people coming into communities who will 'change our lives', which link to colonial histories, and cultural myths (Vasquez del Aguila 2007).

Similarly, in the third round of qualitative research in Vietnam, a new fieldwork team undertook pre-fieldwork visits, consulting with local authorities and contacts. Caregivers and children gave written consent during pre-fieldwork visits, though there were some unexpected situations.

In one site, a mother of a Young Lives child (who is a primary school teacher) was initially very reluctant to let her child have contact with the researcher, and questioned the purpose of the research. The researcher tried her best to explain things, and it seemed that the mother finally understood the purpose of the research, and was more collaborative after a few days (Vu 2012: p18).

Photographs of Young Lives children and adults are not used in publications, on website or printed material. Photographs of children and drawings created by them are returned to the children and families at the next visit. Commissioned photographs of children who are not part of the Young Lives samples are used in communications and advocacy. However, the use of photographs on websites can also lead to misconceptions. For example, in Peru:

The use of photographs was explained again in one site, since some fears arose after a caregiver's older daughter living in Lima looked at the *Young Lives* webpage, and told her pictures of the children are there, and probably people will take the children to other countries. It looked like a sort of catalogue of children available for adoption. We took the opportunity to remind them that the consent procedures only ask for academic use, not publicity, and thus photos on the website, as well as in leaflets, are not of Young Lives children. This eased the fears around the aims of the project towards children. (Ames 2009: p21)

Similarly, in Vietnam, fieldwork coincided with a newspaper report about a child being kidnapped and killed to have her organs sold:

At the beginning of the fieldwork, some parents of Younger Cohort children were therefore sceptical towards the researchers and were reluctant to allow their children to be alone with researchers, for example on a child-led tour. These attitudes passed after a few days, as they better understood the research (Vu 2012: p18).

As this example shows, it is important that fieldworkers have enough time to communicate respectfully in order to develop trusting relationships with families and children, as well having an understanding of context, including current events and news media stories.

Reciprocity in research: What can Young Lives offer to parents, children and communities?

Young Lives participants are eager to know what happens to the information they provide. In Peru, parents said that they would like to learn more about their children and, since they attended the group sessions and talked to the fieldworkers, perhaps they could get more information about their children's behaviour and feelings, and so on. In one site, parents were worried about the presence of gangs and wanted to know their children's whereabouts. They saw Young Lives as a way of getting advice and information about their children's activities. Similarly, a group of community representatives also recommended that Young Lives should inform the community about its findings. Research teams emphasise that children's confidentiality must be respected, but with such small numbers in each community it has to be recognised that it might be difficult to maintain anonymity. This also depends on the nature of the messages and their audience – what may seem obvious or 'common-sense' to local people may be of importance and value to others.

In Peru, research teams have prepared general summaries of the main results in education and health, and these are given to families in brochures that are easy to read. Teachers themselves had high expectations about the potential benefits of research, and this was also the case in Vietnam. For example, in one site in Peru, a group of teachers said that they would like Young Lives to explain to parents about the benefits of early childhood education, and motivate and convince them to bring their children to kindergarten. Other teachers

asked about what fieldworkers observed in the classrooms; they wanted to know how the children in their class were doing and also get some advice.

Young Lives teams have developed ways to try to give something back to communities, in locally-relevant ways. Some teams make available small amounts of resources that will benefit the whole community, or all children in the community, for example by providing materials for the local schools. However, in some cases, parents do not see it as fair that they are giving up their time but everyone in the community benefits. Preliminary findings are reported to communities at meetings in a manner that is intended to be relevant and accessible, and that highlight the usefulness of the data. The type of reciprocity has been decided by the country teams, but results have varied and as a consequence Young Lives is now moving towards a more centralised strategy whereby teams share examples of reporting findings to community members, families and children, and our Communications Officer coordinates the dissemination material.

As part of the consent and research reciprocity process, research teams explain that Young Lives is taking messages to governments and is advocating for change based on the data people have given. This begs the questions of how likely it is that governments or local policymakers taking notice of research findings. Further, for longitudinal research, it takes time for research findings to work their way into the policy domain. So care needs to be taken not to raise expectations about the type of broader public information that can be provided, so as not to further raise expectations about the potential for Young Lives to bring about change. Young Lives needs to develop more responsive approaches, especially given that while families react positively to the explanation that Young Lives is a study to inform public policy targeted at all children. Ames (personal communication) noted in Peru: ‘even then, they are distrustful of any real impact of the information Young Lives provides in improving the current situation of poverty, because they distrust the government and feel abandoned by it’. Similarly, in Vietnam, our research teams report that people ask ‘why do you keep doing surveys and over and over... but you have not proposed any measure to change the situation in our communities?’ (Duc, personal communication). The comments people make about lack of change are realistic assessments of what happens to research in practice. They challenge Young Lives to provide good quality data and analysis that can genuinely inform policy-making, and to provide some clearly workable suggestions and initiatives that can demonstrate positive change in children’s lives. All of this needs careful consideration as there is a risk that Young Lives could inadvertently come to be seen as an ‘intervention’ or an ‘evaluation’, which has implications for further rounds of data collection.

Ongoing concerns

Research ethics questions raised in Young Lives need constant reflection and development. The salience of the gender of fieldworkers is likely to increase as children get older and there may need to be gender-matching of fieldworkers and respondents. The effects on children and families of being involved in Young Lives also need to be followed over time. As noted, Young Lives attrition rates are very low, but the fact that some children are no longer willing to participate should be seen positively.

The final round of qualitative research takes place in 2014, and the following questions arise. First, Young Lives needs to find ways of dealing with continued high expectations of the research. Second, the question of informed consent becomes more complex, and local norms need to be respected while retaining primacy of informed consent from young people. In India, for example, married girls will be living with their in-laws, and the expectation is that the mother-in-law will need to give permission for the daughter-in-law’s involvement in research. There are concerns about asking young women sensitive questions about how they are treated in their new homes, in contexts where there are no support systems in place. If a baby has been born to a Young Lives participant, fieldworkers need to obtain verbal consent from the spouse to include some basic physical measurements. Finally, Young Lives qualitative research teams have established trusting, long-term

relationships with children and families. While participants will continue to be involved in the survey, qualitative research teams need to find ways to say goodbye and close the relationship. Again, the literature on this for developing countries is scanty, but see Kjørholt (2012), who describes students' experiences of ending fieldwork. In Canada, Morrison et al. (2012) describe the need for guidelines to be established on how to end researchers' involvement with their participants without them feeling 'used'. Neale (2013, this issue) highlights similar considerations in qualitative longitudinal research in the UK.

An advantage of long-term research is that it provides time to learn from experience and adapt methods and ethics approaches. Young Lives research tools/activities may be experienced as time-consuming and difficult. For example, some of the questions in the household survey and child survey are complex, and people may have difficulty answering them. Subsequent rounds of the questionnaire have been adapted to minimise these difficulties, but there is a tension because of the need for continuity of data in a panel study. In developing Round 3 survey questionnaires, some sensitive and intrusive questions were discussed and dropped, or refocused, in case they cause distress or difficulties. For example, in Ethiopia, because of the political situation, it would be too sensitive to ask about participation in political protests. Finally, Young Lives needs to develop clear communication about what fieldworkers can and cannot do in terms of helping families and children.

Conclusions

This paper has discussed some of the practical ethics questions encountered during an ongoing longitudinal study with children, caregivers and other community members in context of poverty in four very different contexts. It has emphasised the importance of continuous processes of negotiation of research ethics over time. By drawing on experiences from fieldwork, I have offered examples encountered in the research in an attempt to provide insights into everyday encounters. Some of the difficulties Young Lives contends with are specific to longitudinal research. However, many of the questions that have been explored here are also associated with general problems prevalent within the study countries, and research ethics needs to be understood in context. Young Lives has attempted to generate a shared approach across the whole study to ethics questions and difficulties that arise. This needs to be a two-way learning process. Above all, there needs to be continuous review and reflection on practices and frameworks within the context of the dynamic situations in which Young Lives research is conducted.

Acknowledgements

This paper has drawn on earlier publications from the Young Lives study:

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¹ See Powell et al 2012 for a review. Other relevant sources include: Abebe, 2009; Ahsan 2009; Anandalakshmy et al. 2008; Beazley et al. 2009; Chakraborty 2009; CP MERG 2012; Clacherty & Donald 2007; Fosheim, 2012; Hart, 2012; Jabeen 2009; Kjørholt 2012; Lolichen 2007; Montgomery 2007; Nyambedha 2008; Porter & Abane 2008; Robson et al 2009; Twum-Danso 2009; Vakaoti 2009. For discussions of ethics in research with children and young people in developing countries, see Alderson & Morrow 2011; Ennew & Pierre Plateau 2004; Laws & Mann 2004; Schenk & Williamson 2005.

² Less than 2 per cent per annum, usually due to people withdrawing or, more usually, to the death of children; see Outes-Leon and Dercon (2008).

³ For example, one Young Lives study site, a community in Andhra Pradesh, Poompuhar (a pseudonym) has been the recipient of the following: the Indiramma scheme (Integrated Development in Rural Areas and Model Municipal Areas, a scheme to improve the standard of living in rural villages); PDS Antyodaya-Annayojana, Annapoorna, (national midday meal scheme); educational schemes (free text books); ICDS (Integrated Child Development Service); health, natural resource management and other social security programmes (such as food for work, widow/disabled pension, national family benefit scheme (NFBS); national maternity benefit scheme (NMBS); Girl Child Protection Scheme (see <http://www.aponline.gov.in>); Indira awaz yojana (IAY), a scheme to provide houses to rural poor below the poverty line, free of cost; national old age pension scheme (NOAP), and so on.