

# Sharing practical experiences: The case of Young Lives research ethics

YOUNG LIVES IMPACT AND LEARNING • CASE STUDY 8

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In response to frequent requests to share their experiences of carrying out both longitudinal research and research with children in developing countries, the Young Lives team has been working with Dr Virginia Morrow, a sociologist who has written extensively on the research ethics, to describe and discuss the ethical challenges faced by Young Lives and distil them with her own knowledge on how to approach the issues that have arisen.

These experiences have been captured in a Young Lives Working Paper, *The Ethics of Social Research with Children and Families in Young Lives: Practical Experiences* which outlines the approach taken to research ethics within Young Lives.

***Interest in the ethics of research with children has grown rapidly over the past twenty years. Yet apart from a few recent exceptions, much focus has been on qualitative research with children in developed countries.***

***By sharing their approach, the challenges they faced, the solutions they developed, and the lessons they learned, Young Lives has contributed to discussions about the ethics of research with children in developing countries, and the ethics of longitudinal studies more broadly.***

As a study which tracks the same children and their families over a long period of time, Young Lives encounters a number of ethics questions that arise from managing and maintaining long-term relationships necessary for the study of children growing up in poor communities. These include questions on seeking informed consent, dealing with raised expectations, addressing parents' fears, discussing questions of compensation for time spent with researchers, and the exchange and archiving of research data. Such questions not only highlight the sensitivities of research for the children, their caregivers and others in the community, but also how these play out in policy terms.

Young Lives seeks opportunities to share their experiences of carrying out both longitudinal research and research with children in developing countries and are frequently asked to do so. They are also aware of a rising demand among postgraduate social science students to understand more about the ethics of research involving children, or about children. In response, the Young Lives team has been working with Dr Virginia Morrow, a sociologist who has written extensively on the research ethics, to describe and discuss the ethical challenges faced by Young Lives and distil them with her own knowledge on how to approach the issues that have arisen.

As part of this work, fieldworkers have been documenting difficulties and how these are resolved, and these notes have formed the basis of analysis and learning, that are shared across the study countries, and more widely within the academic community. Young Lives have also looked across the whole study, more broadly, to explore general questions that affect all their study countries.

## Sharing practical experiences

So far, these experiences have been captured in a Young Lives Working Paper, *The Ethics of Social Research with Children and Families in Young Lives: Practical Experiences* which outlines the approach taken to research ethics within Young Lives, describes some of the practical difficulties that Young Lives faces, and emphasises the importance of understanding local contexts in undertaking research with children and families in environments that may change rapidly from one year to the next.

The paper has been published on the Young Lives website and distributed to a large number of key stakeholders, all of whom have been invited to share the paper with their networks. Presentations based on the paper have been given at Young Lives international team meetings (Hanoi 2008, Lima 2010) as well as at workshops and conferences including the International Conference of the Centre for the Study of Children and Youth in 2008, a Timescapes research seminar in Leeds in 2008, a Timescapes conference in Cardiff in 2010, a seminar at the Institute of Child Health at University College London in July 2010, the Global Childhoods conference hosted by CUNY in New York in March 2011, a 'brown bag lunch' meeting at UNICEF in New York in March 2011, the Childwatch International child research ethics meeting in July 2011, and a teaching session for DPhil students in Oxford in May 2011.



Other outcomes include:

- Young Lives were invited to contribute a case study in the 2010 ESRC Framework for Research Ethics
- The Young Lives research ethics paper and web pages were cited on a Canadian research ethics blog as an example of good practice
- Young Lives has produced a methods guide to share how the study went about compiling the Young Lives survey, the challenges they faced, the solutions they developed, and the lessons they learned.

### **Ethics enabling high-quality research**

Research ethics is an essential part of any study from beginning to end, and the Young Lives team take a positive view of research ethics as enabling high-quality research, while at the same time being conscious of the ethics questions their work raises. Among the lessons learned from adopting this approach have been:

- That attention to research ethics has to be on-going throughout the study.
- That an understanding of context, theoretical perspectives, power relationships, are all crucial for how ethics work in practice.
- Attention needs to be paid to ethics questions that arise in the surveys and policy research as well as those concerning qualitative research.
- The importance of legitimacy. Young Lives has formal ethics approval from University and in-country ethics review boards.

### **Further reading**

Priscilla Alderson and Virginia Morrow (2011) *The Ethics of Research with Children and Young People: A Practical Handbook*, London: Sage.

Special issue of *Children's Geographies* (Vol 7.4, 2009) edited by H. Beazley, S. Bessell, J. Ennew and R. Waterson (2009) *The Right to be Properly Researched: Research with Children in a Messy, Real World*.

Virginia Morrow (2009) *The Ethics of Social Research with Children and Families in Young Lives: Practical Experiences*, Young Lives Working Paper 53.

K. Schenk and J. Williamson (2005) *Ethical Approaches to Gathering Information from Children and Adolescents in International Settings: Guidelines and Resources*, Washington DC: Population Council.

Ethics page on Young Lives website:

<http://www.younglives.org.uk/what-we-do/research-methods/ethics>

Research ethics blog:

<http://researchethicsblog.com/2009/09/12/finally-some-good-news-in-research-ethics/>

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