Chapter 6
Ethical Research with Children: Reflections from Fieldwork in Dhaka, Bangladesh

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Abstract During the past two decades, literature has increasingly focused on ethical research with marginalised children. This chapter reflects on the ethical issues I was confronted with during my first encounter with street children in Dhaka. These issues are highlighted through the lens of power relations and compensation to participants against specific research contexts in an informal settlement in Dhaka. In particular, this chapter draws on my experiences of how these issues were materialised and politicised through my encounters with the children and the gatekeeper. I argue that it is necessary for researchers to re-assess institutional ethical requirements because the reality that emerges from the field may not be always similar to what is anticipated prior to their research. Through the narratives of this chapter, I highlight how tensions of power dynamics and compensation have contributed to my understanding of the ethical issues that could potentially open grounds for confronting questions and discussions from other researchers to reorient and localise research practices with children.

Keywords Ethics · Power relations · Compensation · Children's research · Bangladesh

6.1   Introduction

This chapter offers a visceral reflection of how I responded to and struggled with ethical issues of research with children in Dhaka, Bangladesh. I conducted an ethnographic study with street children about their everyday lives during 2018–2019. The children whom I engaged with were between the ages of eight and 17. Most of

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the children were engaged in informal work for various reasons, including supporting their families, meeting their daily needs, and surviving on the street. I worked with three NGOs, which provided me with the access to the children in various sites in Dhaka. These sites included an informal settlement also known as, *bosti*, in Korail, a shelter in Mirpur, and a park in Dhanmondi. The objective of this chapter is to reflect upon the epistemological framework of power dynamics and compensation to the children against the empirical evidence that emerged from my first meeting with the children in Korail.

I met the children through my gatekeeper, Mamtaj, who was a local community member. The collaborating NGO in Dhaka had assigned her to me prior to my visit. From my encounter with the children, I address two issues. One is how power of the gatekeeper can be materialised, understood, and politicised within a specific research setting. The other is compensation to participants as an ethical issue (Hammett and Sporton 2012; Laws and Mann 2004) not necessarily as a disparate topic but one that has perpetuated from the same encounters with the children, their families, and the gatekeeper. Confronting these issues have compelled me to interrogate the thrust for ethical rigours and tensions of these issues (Christensen and James 2000; Christensen 2004; Laws and Mann 2004; Abebe 2009; Abebe and Bessell 2014) in my own research with the marginalised children in Dhaka. Throughout this chapter, I have used several Bengali terms in order to provide readers with insights into some ethnographic conversations with children and community members that shed light on the context of everyday practices in a marginalised community in Bangladesh.

Considering the diverse demographics of street children in Dhaka, ethics can be seen as critical to my research (Young and Barrett 2001). In explaining the relevance of this argument, Young and Barrett (2001: 130) further posit that 'childhood is diverse, with different children … requiring unique approaches which often present the researcher with unexpected moral dilemmas'. Hopkins (2007: 367) explains that the growing importance of ethical research has prompted the 'proliferation of guidance, codes and policies' to guide ethical conducts of research. According to Bushin (2009), however, ethical guidelines need to be understood against the contexts in which researchers engage with their research. Furthermore, Bushin (2009: 22) suggests that researchers need to pursue their ethical judgment based on their 'research project[,] … knowledge of the participants [and] … setting/s for their research'. To extend this view further, my own experience of acquiring ethical clearance in Dhaka resulted in frustrations from having to deal with the lack of established ethical protocols to work with children. Abebe and Bessell (2014) provide some relevance to my experience as they argue that the practices of research with children is somewhat limited in the Global South due to the absence of institutional thrust for knowledge-production about ethical research in children's studies. Yet, the principles of ethical research with children cannot necessarily be ignored. Abebe and Bessell (2014: 129) offer an example of an alternative guideline in Australia that extends 'a degree of discretion' that researchers can use while conforming to the institutional ethical guidelines.

From the discussions above, this chapter engages with the evidence from the field that may inform other researchers to rethink the boundaries of ethics. I argue that it may be necessary for researchers to re-assess the institutional ethical requirements because the reality that emerges from the field may not be as transparent as what is anticipated prior to their research. In doing so, I explain the tensions of research from the field in order to inform other researchers about the cultural and political practices and the peculiarities that may not be always articulated by the institutional guidelines and requirements.

The structure of this chapter is as follows. I first introduce key epistemological discussions on power relations and compensation respectively as key ethical issues relevant to the understanding of research with marginalised children; I then explain my ethical practices and tensions within the research environment and reality in Dhaka. Finally, in the concluding remarks I signpost the nuances of ethical research through the lens of power relations and compensation, aimed at understanding the roles of ethics within the research context in Dhaka.

6.2   Power Relations and Compensation: Politics of Korail *bosti*

Research with children presents a number of concerns about the inherent power relations between children and adults (Cornwall and Jewkes 2010). Dowling (2010) argues that power is central to qualitative research because the information researchers gather from their research can influence people's lives both directly and indirectly. However, the process of gathering information by researchers is also fraught with power dynamics, which may arise from the authority of the locals and the cultural practices in the field. Allen (2003) discusses about the association of geography and power that I find relevant in the context of my own research in Bangladesh, in which power is an effect of the social relation that exemplifies proxies of authoritative practices among men, women, and children. I examine this form of power dynamics in Dhaka that reveals 'messy co-existences and awkward juxtapositions of power that characterize places' (Allen 2003: 159). In this sense, this narrative discusses power dynamics of the gatekeeper of an informal settlement in Dhaka. But scholars have also criticised these power dynamics as being 'conceptualisation of power' (Gallagher 2009: 87), in which the discussion of power relations between adults and children remains within the notion of the 'powerlessness' of children and the dominance of adults over them (Gallagher 2009). With this understanding, I hope to offer some insights into the ethical tensions of research with children that are not always known and understood, but are necessary to gain reasonable understandings about their lives through an 'ethically acceptable research relationship' (Gallagher 2009: 89). To an extent, neutralising power dynamics and children's participation in research requires giving children an option of their participation, which can manifest into opening up the meaning of their lived experiences (Greig and Taylor 1999).

After I met the children in Korail, I explicitly told them that they were not obligated to participate in the meeting with me, and that they could leave at any time if they chose to. But the issue of power dynamics, in my case, did not just exist between the children and myself. It involved the tension of power dynamics between myself and Mamtaj, my gatekeeper, which had led me to learn about the importance of limiting the involvement of the adults during my interviews with the children. During my first meeting with the children (more details in Sect. 6.3), adults had certain control over me. For example, I did not have control over the selection of the children for the interview. Prior to my visit, Mamtaj told me that she would arrange the children for their interview with me. I did not object because I was perhaps too naïve and inexperienced as a researcher. Yet, I was eager to meet with the children. But from the experiences of adult interactions and interventions that emerged, I had begun to think that it was not only necessary to interview the children without having to expose them to any conflict or power struggle with the adults, it was also critical to learn about their own perspectives. My intention was to seek 'insights into the worlds of children and predicaments they face' (Jones 2009: 198) in their everyday lives, which they understood and were able to articulate from their own perspectives, including their expectations from me.

Compensation, financial or otherwise such as gifts, to research participants is fraught with debates. On one hand, it recognises participants' 'time and contribution' and, on the other, it opens up expectations 'of recompense for participation' (Laws and Mann 2004: 39). My intention to compensate the children arose from 'my respect for their participation' (Couch 2010: 155). So, I intended to offer gifts, lunch, trips for the children. But I could never fully know what the 'real' intentions of the children and their parents were to have allowed me to work with them. This uncertainty, however, reflected the context and circumstances in which I made my offers. Hammett and Sporton (2012: 498) argue that compensations or payments to research participants in marginalised communities can create tensions if those communities are 'frequently visited by visiting research parties'. An NGO worker in charge of various projects in Korail informal settlement had mentioned to me that it was common for researchers to offer gifts to the children. He also said that sometimes this can raise tensions within the community if the gifts, donations, or other services were not distributed through 'proper channels'. Sherry (1983: 161) argues that the intended meaning of gift giving can be construed as 'situational conditions of giving' arising from a multiplicity of circumstances in the field. Similarly, by 'proper channels' the NGO worker meant community leaders, gatekeepers, or other stakeholders who possessed some forms of authority within the community. The gifts, he said, were necessary for not only children, women, and/or other groups within the community to participate in research, but also to establish goodwill between the researcher and the participants. 'They [gifts] are not mandatory, but sometimes it's necessary to keep them, *khusi*, happy', he added. In the following section, I highlight issues of power and compensation through my ethnographic observation from the field.

6.3   Experiences and Tensions from the Field

Mamtaj had invited me to her home to meet with the children. Upon my arrival, she told me that my meeting with the children was called, *nam dewa*, name-giving. It is known among the Korail residents as a process for researchers, NGOs and others to engage with the children for the purposes of conducting research and social services. Besides being enlisted for interviews, 'name-giving' also implies that participants are to be 'listed' by the community leaders like Mamtaj before they receive benefits from local and foreign NGOs, government agencies, civic societies, and individuals. The benefits include the opportunities to attend schools in the community and to receive books and school supplies, uniforms, clothing, food, etc. I did not know how the selection process worked. When asked about it, Mamtaj only told me that it was based on the needs of the children, which did not tell me much, but I did not want to risk offending her by appearing to be too pushy. Mamtaj explained a few rules for interviewing the children. That I would have to call her prior to coming to Korail to arrange a schedule for the interview. This would allow her to gather (arrange) the children for interviews. Furthermore, she had cautioned me that there would be no exception to these rules because she would be responsible for, *dekha-shona*, looking after, the children. She had emphasised that this would be her, *daa-ittoo*, duty. Mamtaj's rules in the selection of the children represented a sense of my 'lack of authority' (Skelton 2008: 453) to engage with the children.

Mamtaj also invited two female community members to the meeting. As Mamtaj introduced them to me, she said that they worked with her in the community and that they had wanted to join. I did not object to their presence because I did not want to offend neither Mamtaj nor the women. Seven or eight children, a mix of boys and girls, a couple with their parents, also arrived. Mamtaj brought tea and biscuits for me. After initial introduction and pleasantries over biscuits and tea, I asked Mamtaj if I could talk to the children. 'Yes, go ahead', she said. I asked the children and the parents if I could talk to them. I explained my role as a researcher and that I was there to talk to them about their lives. They agreed. So, I turned to a girl who was sitting next to me. I asked her name. She did not reply. 'Tell your name', her mother, who accompanied with her, said. She did not immediately respond. I waited. 'Fatima', she spoke shyly. 'How old are you?' I asked. 'Ten', her mother said. 'What grade are you in?' I asked Fatima. I did not ask whether she went to school or not. My intention was not to offend Fatima and her mother in front of her children and parents by making any negative assumptions about Fatima. While I was waiting for her answer, I noticed Mamtaj and the two community members were whispering. I did not know what to make of it, but Mamtaj told me that I could not interview Fatima because she had not been 'listed'. Fatima's mother became confused. 'Why not'? She asked. She demanded that her daughter be interviewed. At her insistence, Mamtaj and the two community members became visibly agitated and they started an argument with Fatima's mother. Gradually, Mamtaj and her colleagues started speaking in an abusive way to Fatima's mother.

I sat silently but kept observing what was unfolding around me. Their argument escalated to the point that everyone, including myself, Fatima, and other children in the room, froze, unable to speak or to dare. Fatima's mother started to cry and with an unsteady voice she blamed the three women for taking something for their own benefits from the interview. No sooner had she said that than Mamtaj's fury turned ugly. She screamed at Fatima's mother and said to her that I was not here to give anything. '*Uni ekjon gobeshok*, he is a researcher', she screamed, pointing her fingers to me in order to draw attention to Fatima's mother about my identity. But Fatima's mother, whether she understood my purpose of being there or believed Mamtaj, kept blaming the women for presumably gaining something unfairly for their own benefit. At that point, Mamtaj and her colleagues became visibly violent. They started to shout at Fatima's mother and curse her collectively. 'Get the hell out here you bitch', one of them said. They rose from their chairs as if getting ready to hit Fatima's mother. I turned to Fatima. She sat stone-faced; yet she sheepishly kept looking at her mother, who was crying, and the three women. I wondered if she was used to this conflict and violence in her everyday life. I remained seated, paralysed, not knowing what to do. Something 'strange' was happening that was unknown to me but it was about my 'entry' into their world (Rabinow 1977). And I realised that I was at the centre of what was happening. Fatima's mother thought I was there to 'give something' to the children. She refused to believe otherwise. Mamtaj and the community members eventually escorted Fatima and her mother out of the room.

In light of this conflict, it is perhaps reasonable to think that Korail community remains at the mercy of the influence of the powerful community leaders and their problematically crafted role in decision-making (Morshed and Asami 2015). An NGO officer, whom I met after the incident and who oversaw the programs and services in Korail, told me that internal decision-makings regarding aid and other resources for Korail residents are relegated to the community members who were not necessarily incompetent but were inept, often seeking to serve the, *pori-chito lokh*, known people, in the community. I wondered if Fatima's mother had had any issues with Mamtaj and the community members. The NGO officer also told me that the community expectation about, *kichu pawa*, getting something, is a manifestation of NGO, civil society, government, and individual practices in Korail where they give away tangible things to children and their families, and as a result, residents in Korail were unaware of the limits of their expectations. These benefits have created perpetual expectations among the Korail residents who encounter, *oporichito manush*, a stranger, in their communities, like me, he added. The NGO officer had told me that it was common for the community members to intervene during meetings and interviews between children and outsiders. My identity as a researcher from a Western university also reminded me that I was an outsider in their community. I had to be cognizant about my plans to interact with the children as well as to offer gifts and lunches. Yet, I came to understand from my experience that I might not always have the upper hand during my interactions with the children (Willis 2014). This was necessary for me to realise and learn about how relationships and negotiations in the field were materialised and negotiated (Sparrman 2014). In the case of the conflict during my interview, Fatima's mother did not register her

daughter for the interview. She had heard about my arrival as a researcher and decided to show up without enrolling her daughter's name through Mamtaj and other community members. But the violent interjections of Mamtaj and her colleagues during the conflict illustrated the power of the community women in order to maintain equity of aid and resources among children and residents (Hossain 2013). The authority of Mamtaj had indicated her influence in the selection process of the children in Korail. But her authority also arises from her responsibility as a community leader to provide resources for the children from outsiders.

The expectation of children and their families about 'getting something' worried me as I had plans to give gifts, buy lunch, or take the children out to movies/site visits as a way of showing my gratitude to the children for their time to take part in the research. The readings from literature on compensating research participants prior to arriving in the field had provided some theoretical guidelines for me. However, the incident in Korail cautioned me about offering any form of compensation to the children. In addition, I began to harbour contradictory thoughts about offering gifts and lunches or taking the children to the movies in my future encounters with the children. Before I came to Korail, I had told Mamtaj that I might offer children gifts and lunch for their time in various linguistic terms: *jodi taka thake*, if there's funding; *jodi ami pari*, if I can; *jodi amar samortho thake*, if I have the capacity. The purpose was to ensure that I was not committing to any promises while, on the other hand, my offer indicated my goodwill towards the children. Yet, the contradiction of compensating children left me interrogating my consciousness about further consequences that I had yet to encounter.

After the incident, Mamtaj asked me to come back at another time to interview the children. 'I will call you', she promised. I left Korail with a sense of uneasiness about my own capacity and my identity as a researcher in a city that was both my 'home' and 'field' (Sultana 2007). And this dichotomy had placed me in an odd position, a temporal state of mind, in which I needed to be reflective about my 'own positionality' within the 'grids of power relations and how that influences […] interpretations, and knowledge production' (Sultana 2007: 376) from my research. On the one hand, my position as a researcher with the children in Korail gave me an opportunity to discover about their lives. On the other hand, my position was also somewhat restricted by the powerful presence of the gatekeeper and the community members in charge of the children. When I received a call from Mamtaj the next day, she apologised for the incident. She invited me back to her home to have a chat with her. So, I returned to Korail a few days later with a sense of purpose to find out more about the incident with Fatima's mother. I asked Mamtaj why Fatima's mother and Fatima were present at the meeting. She said they had randomly showed up and Mamtaj just could not kick them out. 'Does it happen often?' I asked. 'Just leave it', she said. I sensed a trace of irritation in her voice. I did not want to risk offending her so I moved on. As we continued our discussion, Mamtaj told me that I needed to learn about the *riti-niti*, politics, of Korail. 'You came here to research but you need to learn, and understand', she plainly said. 'But I am here, don't worry', she also assured me. While her assurance was comforting, my instincts also reminded me that to engage with the children and other adults in Korail would require

disengaging with my own discretion, decision, and will as a researcher. Mamtaj's role as my central gateway to the children reminded me about her authority for the well-being of the children and people under her care (Reeves 2010). I had to accept it because not only did I need to gain her trust, but also to understand the 'cultural indication of trust' (Norman 2009: 73).

My meeting in Korail did not necessarily produce any in-depth discussion with the children. Because of the conflict, the meeting had to be ended. Yet, it provided some key insights into power dynamics and compensation to participants, both of which were necessary for me to reflect on conducting my research in an ethical manner. While compensation to research participants has raised ethical issues, it can be a necessary tool for gaining trust and participation (Morrow 2009). Yet, in this case, the violent encounter reminded me to become aware and cautious about the rules of engagement with compensation and expectation. Observations of Hammett and Sporton (2012: 498) have provided some relevance into the necessity of offering gifts or payments as a form of 'reciprocal exchange relations' to seek and to establish favourable relationships with the participants. My follow-up discussion after the incident with Mamtaj provided some insights into the politics of Korial community — the *riti-niti*, as Mamtaj called it. 'We know how to manage these people but you are new, *notun*, here and you will learn', Mamtaj told me. The introduction of the rules of politics was both critical and unknown to me. Yet, these revelations helped me to adapt strategies in order to negotiate further interviews and encounters with the participants (Hammett and Sporton 2012; McAreavey and Das 2013). In order to cultivate a trusting relationship (Blix and Wettergren 2015; Norman 2009) with Mamtaj, I had sought assurance from her about interviewing the children without any further conflicts. I told her that it'd help for the children to offer their perspectives without the presence of the adults. She had agreed to allow the children to talk to me without their parents, herself, or any other adults. I also sought advice on appropriate compensation for the children.

6.4   Conclusion

In this chapter, I have provided some insights into ethical tensions of conducting research with children in a marginalised community through the lens of power relations and compensation against my own research experience in Dhaka. While ethical considerations remain a linchpin of children's research, these considerations in Bangladesh are not so transparent. However, it is not to say that there are no protocols for ethics. In fact, Abebe and Bessell (2014) discover that many countries in the Global South have their own ethical protocols and requirements. Regardless of where research with children is undertaken, power dynamics between adults and children need to be considered during research (Gallagher 2009). These power dynamics and the adult interactions during the research process demand that particular consideration be given to ethics (Abebe and Bessell 2014). Although ethical guidelines often set the tone for the researchers to engage with vulnerable

children, the rigour of ethical requirements can hinder encountering the reality of the field, making it difficult for researchers to address the 'ethical uncertainty' (Palmer et al. 2014) of research within its context. However, evidence of countering ethical uncertainties exists, where researchers are able to adapt the ethical guidelines to local culture and context. In other words, the rules of engagement with ethics are not necessarily immune to discretion and judgment within the context of research. The experience of conflict in Korail highlighted the rules of engagement with the community as a researcher and enhanced my understanding of the expectation of the community members and participants from the researcher. My experience did not prepare me for the nuances of community relationships that played out among the residents in, *bosti*, informal settlements. It took an entire episode of violent encounter between a parent and the community leaders for me to learn about how a researcher engages with the participants through a vetting process done by community members prior to the engagements. The episode also reminded me to think deeply about the reality of the power dynamics between parents and children in Korail that embodies protection of children from outsiders. The intention of this chapter, through the experiences of my research in Dhaka, has been to reflect my own experiences about the ethical tensions and to open grounds for other researchers to learn about reorienting and localising ethical practices with children during field studies, which may not be native to them. Furthermore, the intended contribution has been to offer some new insights into how practices of power relations and compensation in marginalised communities are politicised, perceived, and practiced from my ethnographic encounters in Dhaka.

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