

Ethical dilemmas in the field in Pakistan

This paper will explore the question of research ethics in qualitative research in Pakistan with reference to actual fieldwork experiences among some of the poorest, most marginalized, and most vulnerable groups. The ethical dilemmas faced by the researcher are explored in cases where the “subjects” might be involved in socially taboo livelihoods (like begging, or sex work), might have uncertain legal status (e.g. irregular migrants), or might be extremely vulnerable to domination and abuse.

Qualitative research can be seen as a process of understanding social norms, how these are perceived, and how they are perceived to be changing over time. The perspective of the informant occupies the central place in this type of research. While sound research ethics are required in all conditions, and in the case of descriptive anthropological qualitative research with vulnerable insecure communities and sensitive research themes they are absolutely indispensable. Qualitative research often involves a short-term temporary relationship between the researcher and the research “subject”. The researcher must quickly understand the logic and requirements of the research question. Qualitative research is not a numbers debate or query about yes or no but an intercultural interaction between informant (*better informed regarding self and community*) and a researcher (*not knowledgeable regarding real conditions of informants and community*).

In the paper there are four stories from fieldwork while conducting qualitative research in three different sites in Pakistan and for three different research studies.