The ethics of poverty research

"The rich get richer and the poor get researchers." (Stuart Rutherford)

Anyone researching poverty should think carefully about the ethics of their research and about their actions and those of their research assistants and survey teams. Five particular issues must be kept in mind:

1. Researchers, interviewers and enumerators can reinforce existing social relationships (that keep poor people poor) by not treating poor people as social equals.
2. Research can be intrusive and, at times, can generate conflict within and between households and more widely.
3. Research takes up poor people’s time – this is often a scarce resource especially at ‘peak’ times of the year, during market/trading periods and for ‘triple burdened’ women.
4. The objective of policy relevant research is to produce policy advice – a public good for ‘all’ poor people. However, the poor’s input is private time.
5. You are almost certainly being rewarded (in terms of money, status and education) through your specific research activities – what’s in it for the woman/man at the receiving end of your questions?

To deal with these issues the Chronic Poverty Research Consortium (CPRC) has a ‘bottom line’ principle that must be adhered to by all CPRC researchers and associates and a list of ‘good practice’ guidelines.

The Principle
The minimum requirement of CPRC research activities at individual and household level is that it does not damage the social and economic conditions and prospects of the people being interviewed, observed or participating in research. If there is any doubt about this (people may lose income, be embarrassed, conflict may be generated) then the researcher should cease activity as quickly and tactfully as possible.

Practice Guidelines

- Always introduce yourself and explain clearly what you are doing and why.
- Check that people have the time to talk/meet with you.
- Before you ask any questions/commence any exercises ask if people have any questions for you. Always conclude by letting people ask you questions about yourself and the research.
- Treat people (men/women, young/old, able bodied/disabled, ‘uppers’/‘lowers’) as your equals – within prevailing social conventions.
- If people indicate that they ‘need to leave’ do not delay them.
- Be sensitive about issues that may cause shame and embarrassment.
- Think carefully about public discussions - it is generally not good for villagers to publicly identify ‘their poor’!
- Whenever feasible, share research findings with the people involved in the research.
- If you are taking up significant amounts of a person’s/household’s time think about ‘rewarding’ them. In rich countries focus group participants are paid cash – you could consider this, or something more appropriate (e.g. in Bangladesh giving long term researchers a sari or shirt to show you appreciation of their assistance). At the same time, paying can introduce bias - paid respondents may be more inclined to try to say what they think the researcher wants to hear. Consider the types of respondent payment encourages to participate.
- Be careful with being entertained – the cold drinks or cigarettes you are given might have been spent on school fees instead – but also be careful not to offend.

Source: Chronic poverty website: [http://www.chronicpoverty.org/CPToolbox/Ethics.htm](http://www.chronicpoverty.org/CPToolbox/Ethics.htm)

http://manual.recoup.educ.cam.ac.uk