Case 1: An unwelcome visitor

Mina is a young researcher conducting her first major study: a massive qualitative study about perceptions of the importance of second language acquisition among low-income households. One of Mina's acquaintances knew a family who lived in a low-income urban community which seemed ideal for data collection. Mina decided on interviewing that family first. Mina interviewed the mother, the father, and the grandmother in that household. Everything went well. Mina then decided to go from house-to-house, asking households if they were interested in 'answering a few questions'. Some houses said yes, while others said no.

Unbeknownst to Mina, some families informed their community leaders about what she was doing. The community leaders confronted Mina as she was walking down the street. They angrily asked if she was a journalist, to which she said 'no'. Mina explained that she was a researcher. The leaders did not believe her and accused her of lying. They even accused her of being a reporter for a sensationalist newspaper that wrote negative articles about the community! They told Mina to leave immediately.

(a) Problem Assessment: From a research integrity and ethics viewpoint, what went wrong in this situation?
- Violated the Global Code of Ethics principle of *respect* and the BPS principle of *social responsibility*: Mina did not formally introduce the project and its purpose to the local community leaders, **causing discomfort and disruption to residents in the community**.
- Violated the BPS principle of *respect for autonomy, privacy, and dignity of individuals and communities*: Mina asked households if they wanted to "answer a few questions". Although there is not enough information from the vignette, **Mina might have been unclear in her communication with participants**. Did she say who she was and where she was from? Did she state the purpose of the questions (i.e., for a research study)? Did she give complete information about what she was asking participants to do?

(b) Risk Assessment: Who/what was affected by the situation and what were the consequences experienced?
- Mina's **own safety and security** was at risk during the confrontation with community leaders.
- Community leaders and residents **felt disrespected and were uncomfortable** with Mina's presence.
- **Trust was lost** between Mina and the community. Mina and her colleagues may not be welcome in the community anymore.
- This incident may **damage the reputation** of Mina, her research team, and the organisation she represents.

(c) Solutions: What solutions can be offered or how do we avoid this kind of situation?
- Exercise respect: **Consultations with community leaders** were necessary prior to collecting the data from the community.
- Exercise honesty: **Communicate with participants in a clear and transparent way**. Be ready to provide complete information to participants using recruitment materials, participant information sheets, and consent forms that had been reviewed and approved by the ethics committee.

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Case 2: A failed ethics application

A research team submitted an ethics application for a study that aimed to capture the language environment of children living in an indigenous community. The team wanted to capture 'authentic' and 'spontaneous' language, so they proposed to install recording devices in communal areas in the community, hoping to capture conversations as they happened. They argued that since the conversations were in public areas, there was no need for consent forms. They also did not talk to the local community about their plan. They were confident that the innovative nature of their project would impress the ethics committee and that they could start collecting data next month. To their surprise and disappointment, their application got rejected.

(a) Problem Assessment: From a research integrity and ethics viewpoint, what went wrong in this situation?
  - **Poor planning:** The research team overlooked potential ethics issues in their research design.
  - Violated the BPS principle of *respect for autonomy, privacy, and dignity of individuals and communities*: **Recording conversations in public areas without consent** is unethical because members of the indigenous community would not be aware that they are being recorded, that they have become part of a research study, and have no way of exercising their right to participate voluntarily, to refuse to participate, or to withdraw their participation or their data from the study.
  - **Ethics dumping (violation of the Global Code of Conduct principle of respect)**: The team overlooked the importance of making **consultations** with community leaders and stakeholders and getting their feedback on the research aims and design.
  - **Ethics dumping (violation of the Global Code of Conduct principle of care)**: The research team could be applying lower ethics standards on research with this indigenous community.

(b) Risk Assessment: Who/what was affected by the situation and what were the consequences experienced?
  - The personal conversations of members of the indigenous community, including families and children, are being recorded without their knowledge or approval. This is a **serious breach of their privacy**.
  - The research team will experience a **delay in their project**. Data collection cannot proceed since they do not have an approved ethics application.

(c) Solutions: What solutions can be offered or how do we avoid this kind of situation?
  - Exercise care and respect: **Consultations with community leaders** are necessary prior to collecting the data from the community.
  - **Plan your study carefully** and with ethics considerations in mind. If you are using a method that is novel or has not been reported in the literature before, consult a peer or ask an independent researcher to review your protocol. There are alternatives to capture authentic and spontaneous language ethically.
  - **Participant information sheets and consent forms** must be prepared, approved by the ethics committee, and distributed to the intended study participants for reviewing and accepting before participating in the study.
  - **Train researchers** about the dangers and setbacks of **ethics dumping**.

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Case 3: Famous for the wrong reasons

Fatima was a research assistant in charge of participant recruitment and communication for an online study. Parents and their children participated in the study. To keep track of recruitment, Fatima kept a list of participants in a spreadsheet on her laptop. One day, Fatima lost the laptop. Luckily, all data in the laptop, including the spreadsheet, were backed up. She didn't lose any information related to the study. Fatima bought a new laptop and thought nothing about what happened. A few weeks later, several parents called the research team in a state of distress. One of the mothers found out that all their names, their children's names, and their contact details from the spreadsheet were posted on the internet. Parents complained that their email addresses were spammed with malicious emails and some also reported attempts to hack into their online banking accounts. While investigating, the research team concluded that the leak came from Fatima's lost laptop. The parents were angry and threatened to complain about the research team to the local authorities. Local news outlets became aware of the complaints and sensationalized the incident, naming and shaming members of the research team and the universities they were affiliated with.

(a) Problem Assessment: From a research integrity and ethics viewpoint, what went wrong in this situation?
- Violated the BPS principle of *respect for autonomy, privacy, and dignity of individuals and communities*: The **participants' identities were not kept confidential**.
- Fatima **failed to store participant information securely**. As a result, unauthorized people gained access to the participant list and posted it online for malicious purposes. She also failed to report a potential data breach to her team as a result of losing her laptop.

(b) Risk Assessment: Who/what was affected by the situation and what were the consequences experienced?
- Participants **experienced unnecessary distress** because their participation in the research put them at increased risk (from online scammers and hackers).
- The research and the institution **could be held liable** under data privacy laws in their jurisdiction, depending on the laws applicable there.
- The public and media backlash **damaged the reputation** of the research team and the institution.
- **Trust was lost** between the research team and the participants. Families may hesitate to participate in future research studies because of this incident.

(c) Solutions: What solutions can be offered or how do we avoid this kind of situation?
- Remember to **store information only for as long as it's needed**.
- **Password-protect files** containing sensitive and non-anonymised information.
- **Secure your accounts/devices.** Lock your device with a password and change passwords for your online accounts regularly or if you lose a device.
- **Download security updates** to your device as soon as possible.
- **Remote wipe** the data of a lost device (if this option is available)
- **Report the loss of your device** to the research team as soon as possible so they can find appropriate avenues for advice or support.
- **Communicate openly with participants about the breach** especially if the breach has a high chance of causing negative consequences to them.

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Case 4: A well-intentioned request

Jai was an associate in a research group that studies literacy development among primary school students. He was in charge of visiting schools to collect data on literacy outcomes by asking students to complete a short exercise. All necessary ethics procedures were completed: 1) the ethics application was approved; 2) schools agreed to participate and submitted their consent forms; and, 3) parents received information about the study and submitted their consent forms. Only children whose parents consented were assessed. Jai also had assent forms ready for children to sign.

One day, a school principal sent him an e-mail asking for the data of specific students to help develop a remedial programme for students struggling in English language classes. At first, Jai was taken aback by this request. But after a few minutes, he sent the data and felt proud that their data can help the students. Once data collection at that school was completed, Jai's supervisor sent a customary 'thank you' email to the principal for their participation. The principal replied to express thanks for the data that Jai shared for the new remedial programme. Immediately, the supervisor phoned Jai. She sounded furious.

(a) Problem Assessment: From a research integrity and ethics viewpoint, what went wrong in this situation?
  - We can acknowledge that the **principal's intention was good**; however, the **researcher accommodated an unusual request** that was outside the research plan and was not authorized by the research team.
  - Violated the BPS principle of *respect for autonomy, privacy, and dignity of individuals and communities*: The researcher **shared non-anonymised data**, i.e. data that can be traced back to the original participant. This is a **breach of participant confidentiality**.
  - **Improper data processing:** The data that was collected for research purposes was **used for a new purpose without consent**.
  - The **data was given to an unauthorized individual** who was not part of the research team. An exception is if the principal was also a research collaborator in the project; however, the lead researcher's furious reaction suggests that that is not the case.

(b) Risk Assessment: Who/what was affected by the situation and what were the consequences experienced?
  - **A part of the dataset has been compromised and used for a purpose that was not agreed upon beforehand**. There is a chance that the principal shared the data with other people such as teachers or reading specialists. There is a **betrayal of trust to the children's parents**, who gave consent knowing that the data was going to be kept confidential.
  - **Students who were selected for the remedial program might feel uncomfortable or feel that they were deceived**. They thought the activity they did with the researchers were not going to have any effect on their schooling.
  - This can be considered a **data breach** and may require reporting by Jai's research organisation under GDPR regulations.

(c) Solutions: What solutions can be offered or how do we avoid this kind of situation?
  - **Discuss with schools** the intended use of the data at the beginning of recruitment. If they are interested in seeing how their students fare on the assessments, it is typical to

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offer a school report that reports school-level (aggregated) performance instead of individual data.

- **Train research assistants and research associates** about ways to handle unusual requests. When in doubt, it is always best to **consult other members** of the research team first. It is also good to **know how to politely refuse a request or to say that the rest of the team needs to discuss the matter first**.