Equitable Research Partnerships Toolkit

Tool 13:
Reflection Sessions for Managing Ethical Dilemmas of Frontline Research Staff

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This tool, referred to in the text below as the 'Reflection tool', facilitates an in-person, group-based approach to identifying, discussing and developing strategies for optimally addressing ethical dilemmas. It can also assist with other challenging dilemmas faced by frontline research staff.

In international research partnerships, frontline research staff (often called fieldworkers or data collectors) are typically the interface between academic researchers and research participants. They are often recruited from the local community and can be the lowest paid, and least powerful workers, in a research partnership. Their roles are crucial though. The data they collect is the primary foundation of a research project.

Frontline workers' roles normally require them to come face-to -ace with research participants, whose lived realities often include significant challenges. In these conditions, research participants may have expectations of frontline workers that differ from the expectations of the research institutions they work for. Frontline workers play a central role in building and maintaining relationships with research participants and communities and managing community members' expectations.

Practical, ethical dilemmas are situations in which the best course of action is not clear. Two illustrations of this are a differing of expectations between research participants and the research institution and a lack of resources constraining researchers from doing what they believe to be morally right. For example, research institutions often have policies that prevent frontline researchers assisting research participants. However, a frontline worker may feel morally obligated to give a hungry research participant food.

In morally challenging situations, frontline research staff can end up feeling that they do not know what to do, worrying that the course of action they have chosen is morally wrong or will not be accepted by either the research participant or their employer. The Reflection tool initiates sessions that help research teams to document, acknowledge, and develop strategies to manage the dilemmas that might arise for frontline research staff. On top of that, the tool also guides teams in creating a supportive space for safely discussing difficult ethical situations faced in their day-to-day work.

Why use the Reflection tool?

Field workers may take on an inequitable burden of stress and responsibility for responding to ethical and practical dilemmas. Even when dilemmas cannot be resolved, providing a space to discuss them can help share the burden and increase equity between junior LMIC

Equitable Research Partnerships Toolkit
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(Low-and-Middle-income countries) and senior (often, but not always, high-income countries HIC) researchers in the partnership.

This tool also helps teams navigate the frequent inequities between staff and participants from local communities. While they are often from the same community, frontline research staff may be seen as having an important job or education, thereby creating strong obligations to assist fellow community members with basic needs, like money, food, or transport to the hospital.

Reflection sessions are not an alternative to providing frontline workers with fair salaries, working conditions and opportunities for career progression. However, sharing the burden, and working to manage and reduce frontline workers' dilemmas, is a way of enhancing equity between frontline and office-based/remote research staff, when other structural initiatives to address equity are in place. Using the tool is also likely to improve research rigour, for example by helping field workers capture better quality data and improve response rates.

This tool addresses equity by:

1. Increasing senior (often HIC) field researchers' awareness of the kind of challenges and dilemmas faced by frontline staff, and highlighting the need for them to assist these staff in working through these dilemmas.

2. Increasing support for, and reducing the burden on, frontline research staff.

3. Enhancing ethics of research for participants in LMICs, who are often negotiating multiple livelihood challenges.

When to use the Reflection tool?

Phase	Rating	Descriptions
Planning	•	The tool may be adapted for use in the **planning** stage of a partnership, for example to reflect on expected dilemma scenarios and develop strategies for mitigating and/or managing dilemmas.
Implementing	•••	The tool is designed primarily for regular use in the **implementing** stage.

Disseminating	•	The tool may be adapted to reflect on dilemmas that arise during the **disseminating** and impact phase.
Sustaining	•	Data collected using the tool could be used for evaluating the process and/or outcome in the **sustaining** phase of a research partnership.

Ratings
••• Designed for this stage | •• Can be used as is in this stage | •Can be adapted for use in this stage

How much time is needed to use the Reflection tool?

- Field workers may spend just a few minutes per day, or significantly longer, completing personal diaries.
- In a two-hour reflection session, expect to have time to reflect lightly on many issues and on 2-4 dilemmas in-depth.
- Reflection sessions should ideally occur regularly, for example, bi-weekly or monthly.
- Where funding for reflection sessions has not been included in the budget, less frequent sessions, occurring as often as feasible, will still be useful.

What other resources do you need to use the Reflection tool?

- A skilled facilitator who has good knowledge of the institution and research context.
- A dedicated meeting space, where participants can talk without being overheard by 'outsiders'. Field workers will typically be in the same physical location and not need to meet virtually. However, a virtual meeting could be convened to enable field workers from different sites to reflect, or to enable remote staff to join the reflection session.
- Refreshments to create an informal environment. If sessions last more than two hours, take a refreshment break.
- Hexagonal model of different potential sources of action [available from: https://gh.bmj.com/content/bmjgh/6/7/e004937/F2.large.jpg].
- Resources for documenting the meeting, for example a nominated person to transcribe notes on the proceedings.

Equitable Research Partnerships Toolkit

Tool 13:
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Tips for using the Reflection tool

- To facilitate open and honest reflection on dilemmas, sessions must occur in a 'safe space', where participants feel assured that they will not be blamed or punished. To develop such a space:
  - Allow anonymous submission of dilemmas.
  - Encourage thoughtful reflection, on the structural factors that contribute to the dilemma, and avoid blaming individual workers.
  - Do not punish front line workers for dilemmas they encounter.

- Include regular field worker reflection meetings in the research partnership action plan.

- Request funds for reflection meetings in the research budget, including frontline and senior research staff time, meeting spaces, refreshments, facilitators and stationery.

- Document the reflection sessions as a source of data for monitoring and evaluation.

The following resources provide more detailed information on the development and use of the tool:

- Video: On the frontline: social science researchers from the REACH team share their experiences of navigating the hidden ethical challenges in their work

- Research Article: Model for developing context-sensitive responses to vulnerability in research: managing ethical dilemmas faced by frontline research staff in Kenya

How to use the Reflection tool?

- Provide frontline research staff with diaries in which they can record the dilemmas that arise in their work.

- Ask these staff to anonymously submit one or more dilemmas in advance of each reflection session. Anonymous submission might occur via an online portal or a physical drop box. This step is optional. It may not be necessary if staff feel confident to speak openly about their dilemmas in the reflection session.

- For each dilemma shared, provide time and space for all participants to reflect on the dilemma. To stimulate reflections, the facilitator should pose questions (see below for suggested questions).

- Reflections could take place via:
  - Small group discussions - Provide 15-30 minutes for groups of three to six participants to discuss questions.
  - Role plays - Provide 15-30 minutes for groups of three to six participants to develop a role play about the dilemma. Each group then acts out their play and the entire group discusses the issues raised.

- Reconvene the entire group and share suggestions for actions to be taken.

- Decide on the best course of action and identify who should act.

Suggested questions to explore when using the Reflection tool

These questions are based on those suggested in the ethics reflection tool.

- What happened that led to the frontline worker's ethical or practical dilemma?
- How urgent or serious is the dilemma?
- How is the dilemma related to the research (e.g. caused by, revealed by, background to)?
- How much capacity is there to help a person in need?
- How much capacity is there for the aid to be harmed?
- Who is the best person to help?
- What are the possible implications of intervening for the research study or research institution?

- What level of action is required (refer to the five levels of action in the ethics reflection tool)?
  - Level 1 - Nothing specific beyond sharing and acknowledging the dilemma.
  - Level 2 - The sharing leads to agreed approaches to dealing with similar dilemmas in the future.
  - Level 3 - Study level changes, for example to the protocol or standard operating procedures are required.
  - Level 4 - Institutional level changes, for example to policies and procedures, are required.
  - Level 5 - Regional, national or international changes, for example to national research ethics guidelines, are required.

- What might be the unintended consequences of acting, or not acting, in different ways?
    - For research participants?
    - For families?
    - For health and social services and/or systems?
    - For colleagues?
    - For science and learning?

Completed example of the Reflection tool

Dilemma

During a research encounter, a field worker is offered food by a participant in a food insecure household. The field worker who regularly visits this household to collect data for a longitudinal study. As they are a member of the same community as the participant, the field worker knows that people are culturally expected to accept food when it is offered, and that it can be considered rude to reject food. However, they also suspect that the family do not have enough food for themselves, and that the offering of food is influenced by cultural norms.

Discussion

The following points were raised in the discussion:

- Accepting food might:
    - Show respect.
    - Require additional time that distracts the field worker from other participants.
    - Build trust and rapport.
    - Influence the participant to think they should prepare food for future research encounters.
    - Seem unprofessional.

- Rejecting the food or offering compensation (e.g. payment) for it might:
    - Be considered rude if the rejection was not polite and thoughtful.
    - Lead to the food being wasted.

Decision

The dilemma is partly caused by the research, because the food is offered in the context of a research encounter (the field worker's visit to the house). Because the offering of food occurred in the context of research, participants generally agreed that it was appropriate for

the field worker to break cultural norms and reject the food, so long as they did so politely. For example, they could tell the participant that they are unable to eat with them because of other work commitments or not allowed to accept food because of workplace policies.

The field worker is the key person who needs to act in this situation. Researchers and managers could also act by introducing policies and procedures that guided the field worker's actions (e.g. a policy instructing field workers not to accept food).

Acknowledgements, references and further reading for the Reflection tool

- This tool is based on the model developed at an international research site in Kenya and presented in Molyneux, Sassy, Priya Sukhtankar, Johnstone Thitiri, Rita Njeru, Kui Muraya, Gladys Sanga, Judd L. Walson, James Berkley, Maureen Kelley, and Vicki Marsh. 2021. "Model for developing context-sensitive responses to vulnerability in research: managing ethical dilemmas faced by frontline research staff in Kenya." *BMJ Global Health* 6 (7): e004937. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2021-004937.

- The completed example is based on a dilemma reported in Kamuya, D. M., Theobald, S. J., Munywoki, P. K., Koech, D., Geissler, W. P., & Molyneux, S. C. (2013). Evolving friendships and shifting ethical dilemmas: fieldworkers' experiences in a short-term community-based study in Kenya. *Dev World Bioeth, 13*(1), 1-9. doi:10.1111/dewb.12009