

Ethics as negotiated and emergent in a study of liveability in small cities

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In 2019 our team of researchers implemented an interdisciplinary research project around the concept of 'liveability' in two small cities (population under 200,000) in south west Bangladesh. We are a diverse group made up of four social scientists (Ruszczuk, UK; Rahman, Ahmed and Shudha, Bangladesh), whose backgrounds range from geography to engineering to anthropology, development studies and practice, and one humanities scholar (Halligey, South Africa), who uses theatre and performance as research tools and conceptual lenses in researching daily life in cities. The institutional collaboration for the project was between Durham University, UK (Ruszczuk, Principal Investigator), the International Centre for Climate Change and Development, Independent University of Bangladesh (ICCCAD) and the South African Research Chair in Spatial Analysis and City Planning, University of Witwatersrand. The funding came from the Centre for Sustainable, Healthy and Learning Cities and Neighbourhoods (SHLC)'s Capacity Development Acceleration Fund.¹ As such, the project was implemented through academic channels and run by scholars, but was made possible by development funding. We have written this article collaboratively with Alex Halligey guiding the writing process.

Liveability is a term that has been used in design, planning, geography, development and corporate worlds to assess the relative affordances of cities for wealthy, hyper-mobile elites or for lowest income groups (Ahmed et al., 2019; McArthur and Robin, 2019). Our research project sought to redefine notions of liveability through the experiences of city-dwellers in Mongla and Noapara. Where liveability discourse mainly focuses on metrics determined by large development organisations, we wanted to draw the opinions of residents in small scale, small population, under-researched urban areas into the discussion. Our methods included storytelling workshops, public performances by local participants, 200 household surveys, photo essays, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. We disseminated our findings to research participants, local officials, divisional (regional) institutions, Bangladeshi national policy and scholarly stakeholders, and to our individual universities and funders in early 2020.

We wanted the research process to give participants voice, and for the research data and its dissemination to advocate on behalf of residents and local stakeholders to policy makers. These intentions were our ethical compass in navigating the inductive, participatory, action-oriented methodology of our project. We offer here a short summary of what we see as the project's three primary areas for ethical considerations.

Differing institutional bases

Our first ethical dialogue outside of our team was with university ethics committees. Durham University's committee's primary concern was to follow the ethos of 'do no harm' with a particular emphasis on mitigating the exploitation of children, followed closely by the protection of data and identities (University of Durham,

¹ SHLC is funded via UK Research and Innovation and administered through the Economic and Social Research Council, as part of the UK Government's Global Challenges Research Fund. The SHLC is a large multi-country, multi-year project based at the University of Glasgow.

2018). The University of Witwatersrand's committee was concerned with the terms on which participants were to be engaged; their physical and mental well-being through the process; how much they might be exposing themselves (socially, psychologically, physically) in volunteering knowledge for the project and whether they would be fed and remunerated sufficiently for their time (University of Witwatersrand, 2020). Although much is impossible to account for ahead of the research engagement, these ethical clearance applications were productive, not for pinning down a concrete, ratified ethical approach, but for creating a provisional working model of practical and logistical considerations facilitating an attentiveness to ethics. The applications also opened a conversation early on about how our different institutions expect the detailed practicalities of fieldwork to be conducted.

ICCCAD is accountable to the Independent University of Bangladesh ethics committee and follows standardised research procedures around informed consent. However, with ICCCAD managing the fieldwork on the ground, their ethical considerations as an institution were something we negotiated throughout the project, as opposed to the more singular 'ethical clearance' processes we went through with the other partner institutions' ethics committees. As a Bangladesh-based, local organisation that bridges academic, development and state policy worlds and collaborates with international researchers and development agencies as well as running Bangladeshi initiated projects, ICCCAD has significant ethical responsibilities to consider whatever the intentions of any one, specific project might be. These responsibilities orientate around ordinary citizen research respondents on the one hand and government officials on the other. ICCCAD is wary of exposing residents' identities, lest any political dissensus they express should make local politicians single them out. Researchers also need to carefully manage participants' expectations of payment or future employment that cannot be met. These expectations are not simply dispelled by a clear verbal or written framing, but require a constant, sensitive negotiation with individuals and communities. ICCCAD walks a fine line with state officials at local, regional and state level, hoping to provide research data and analysis that will positively influence policy making and implementation for a more equitable society, but wary of offending officials and losing their buy-in for ICCCAD's long-term vision. As ICCCAD is the institution running the fieldwork, these two major areas for ethical concern (ordinary citizens and official stakeholders) were recurring themes throughout the research and ones which we held in respectful tension with our desire to give visibility to participants' opinions.

Ethics inflected by disciplines

Using interdisciplinary research tools was a further catalyst for ethical deliberation. We reflected with one another on how colleagues in our disciplines might judge our different research tools. For example, we discussed a possible social science concern that performing in the street theatre might be too exposing for participants. Conversely, from the participatory arts perspective, we discussed a potential wariness of surveys as extractive of information without giving participants fora to represent themselves with their own bodies and voices.

A shared perspective across our disciplines and particularly in light of our inductive, participatory approach, was that whatever the method, the researcher-facilitator should not lead participants towards certain responses. These discussions about relative disciplinary viewpoints kept bringing us back to the conclusion that ethics does not lie in the research tool, but rather in how you use the tool and keep renegotiating it in the moment.

Concerns as a team of researchers working together

We spent much time as a team debating ethical considerations not defined by our institutions or disciplines. Our project had a small budget with an ambitious intention and a turnaround of six months for delivery. How could the speed of the research give enough space for an engagement that honours in-depth participation? This was partly mitigated by ICCCAD researchers already having worked in Mongla and Noapara and the promise of further sustained research in these areas. But within the confines of the project itself, the interdisciplinary research toolkit helped too, given the time constraints of the research project. It enabled the triangulation of findings, the drawing of qualitative experiences of liveability into dialogue with quantifiable methods and the provision to participants of multiple opportunities for reflecting on the liveability of their cities. In addition, the research continues in the dissemination process. Through reports and seminars at local and national levels in Bangladesh, discussions within the research team, within and between our research institutes, with our funders and in online platforms with a more global public, we continue to question how we frame and work with the research outputs in a way that honours the ethics of the project.

Conclusion

As with most research, there was not one single ethical protocol for the Liveable Cities in Bangladesh Project. Jonathan Spencer notes ‘the best we can hope for is not so much being “right” but simply being “less wrong” than the last time’ (2010, p.S298). Social scientist and urban planner, Bent Flyvbjerg, argues that the ethical imperative of the social science research situation is premised on a constantly negotiated, relational self-reflexivity. He recommends ‘practical knowledge and practical ethics’, where knowing and ethics are intertwined and emergent through practical engagement in the research situation (2001, p.56). Thinking through Flyvbjerg’s words, we might argue that it is not about being ‘less wrong’ than the last time, but rather ‘the best we can hope for’ is continuing to debate the ethics of research with care and consideration. Each encounter becomes an opportunity to enter into dialogue, to negotiate which emerging ethical path honours the research situation. From here, a provisional way forward is elected in an ongoing formation of an (imperfect) ethics specific to the research project.

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