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How we used moral imagination to address ethical and methodological complexities while conducting research with girls in school against the odds in Kenya

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Abstract

This article presents a reflection on the ethical and methodological complexities experienced when conducting research in schools in Kajiado district, Kenya, which sought to understand why some girls were in school in spite of the socio-cultural and economic problems they faced. Three complexities are discussed (positionality and power between the teachers, girls and researchers, confidentiality of girls' information, and researchers personal involvement and advocacy). A framework of moral imagination is used to deconstruct the process of moral and ethical decision-making that took place in response to these complexities. This involves the researcher taking a position that strives, not simply to 'do no harm', but to go one step further and to 'do good', within a context of social justice. The article is drawn from an ongoing longitudinal study on girls 'against the odds'. In the pilot study reported here, four primary schools were involved and interviews were carried out with 24 girls, alongside observations of the surrounding environment and informal conversations with eight teachers.

Keywords

disadvantaged girls, education, gender, Kenya, methodological complexities, moral imagination, research ethics

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Introduction

This article presents a reflection on the ethics and methodology used in a pilot study in Kajiado district, Kenya, which sought to explore why some girls living in challenging socio-cultural, geographical and economic environments were nevertheless able to attend, participate and complete primary school. In this article, we refer to these girls as 'girls in school against the odds'. The article is derived from a larger longitudinal study that aims to understand these positive cases of persistence, in contrast to the various research studies that have been undertaken on why girls drop out of school. Research shows that the challenges confronting girls in school in Kenya and elsewhere in the global South include teenage pregnancies, female circumcision, early marriages, low social status of girls and women, poverty and the unequal labour burdens on boys and girls (Elimu Yetu Coalition, 2005). Other studies have highlighted issues associated with sexual harassment, negative attitudes to girls' education, teachers' low expectation of girls' performance, a lack of female teachers and role models to encourage girls to continue at school, gender-stereotyped learning materials, the impact of long distances to school on girls' feelings of insecurity, and unfriendly school environments such as inadequate sanitary facilities (Chege and Sifuna, 2006; Subrahmanian, 2005; Thomas, 2002). The situation is worse in the arid and semi-arid lands where pastoralism and nomadism predominate, as was the case in Kajiado district (Elimu Yetu Coalition, 2005).

While attention to the negative factors mentioned above is imperative, and while our research also highlights similar factors that both keep girls out, as well as others that facilitate girls staying in school against the odds, this article focuses discussion on the ethical and methodological complexities we faced whilst conducting the research, and how we used moral imagination to address these complexities. We are aware that ethics and methodology are intertwined, that it is hard to think of one without the other in sound empirical research. As Singleton and Straits (2005: 515) note, 'when we think about how to conduct research, we must think not only of using the *right* technique but also of *rightly* using the technique'. So the inter-related principles of ethics and methodology encapsulate how research is done in a moral and responsible way, such that when collecting data, attention is put on gaining informed consent and affording privacy to the participants, as well as ensuring that no harm or exploitation befalls them during data collection (Burgess, 2002).

In this article, we share the dilemmas that arose during fieldwork, dilemmas that emerged perhaps because, despite being experienced qualitative researchers, we were working in an environment new to both authors. Although one author was Kenyan, and thus had the advantage of knowing the local language and being able to translate the general Kenyan context, she too was new to the study site, with prior knowledge based only on having learned about it through the media and acquaintances from the area. She had also lived in England for 6 years, thus situated in two cultures as home. Khan (2005: 2022–2024), a Pakistani researcher based in Canada, describes this as being in a bind, 'where one is a third-world researcher who lives and works in the first world (over here), yet whose field of research is a third-world site (over there)'. She (Khan, 2005: 2022–2024) writes about how problematic it can be for such a researcher, as he/she is expected to be an authority on his/her own culture in spite of being 'in a bind'. She shares her

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experiences of how some local Pakistanis considered her 'an outsider . . . and not Pakistani enough'. The second author, a native Briton, though having travelled often to Kenya and having family from Kenya, had also not previously visited Kajiado district. It is the passion and dedication that both authors have about participation and retention of girls in Kenyan schools that brought them together to carry out this research, designing it using knowledge and literature from western and southern texts.

It is with this background that the research was planned and carried out, and we share our experiences not only under the mandate of reflexivity that comes with qualitative research, but also for other researchers aiming to work in new contexts (especially in sub-Saharan Africa) to learn from our experiences. We also aim to contribute to literature about the dilemmas that might arise when conducting research with poor children in an African and other southern contexts. Brown et al. (2004) note that such publications are limited within social science. We further consider how the use of moral imagination (a process of ethical reasoning), may help researchers work through these dilemmas. We believe this to be an original contribution to social and educational research because whilst most writings on moral imagination are for business ethics or from a cognitive or theoretical standpoint (Crain, 1985; Johnson, 1985; Moberg and Seabright, 2000; Werhane, 1988; Werhane and Moriarty, 2009), we offer an empirical and reflexive function of moral imagination within social science. In sharing the complexities we experienced, we heed Singleton and Straits' (2005: 516–517) directive, what they call 'the most fundamental ethical dictum', that researchers 'are expected to be "unremittingly honest" in their observations and analysis, questioning, and willing to admit error . . . honestly reporting findings'.

Other researchers have also written about their ethical and methodological challenges whilst either working in the Global South or with marginalised communities. For example, Riessman (2005: 478) reported how her research participants (barren women) in South India resisted signing the informed consent form as they were suspicious, associating 'signing' with a formal government document. Getting privacy for interviews was also difficult, not because of limited space in the village but because infertility was an open concern for family and community. Thus, whilst Riessman would personally have preferred to conduct interviews in complete privacy, she found that family members and neighbours would cluster around the door, watching and listening. For interviews at a local infertility clinic, the room that had been prepared for her was in the labour ward, with a bassinet in it and cries of newborn babies could be heard, a situation apt to cause distress for the woman participant suffering from infertility. Yan and Jament (2008: 24) write about the dilemma of 'face culture' where the participants felt at risk of losing face if they chose to speak out the truth about the low priority given to inclusive education in China. These participants might have felt insecure as their opinions identified some negative aspects which could influence the reputation of their schools or themselves. Mandiyanike (2009: 67) writes about how the 'bad blood' between the Zimbabwean and British governments saw him treated with suspicion by some of his participants in Zimbabwe. His participants strove to be as politically correct as possible, telling him what they thought he wanted to hear. These are just but a few challenges encountered by researchers working in contexts that are different from where their ethical and methodological guidelines were mainly designed. We share our own challenges later.

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Ethical research in new contexts and the need for a moral imagination

Research in new contexts can be daunting, and in preparation we explored, as far as was possible, background literature about the peoples, culture and educational context of Kajiado district (Ministry of Planning and National Development (MPND), 2005; Ombonga and Ongaga, 2009), as well as engaged in dialogue on the methods, instruments and ethical guidelines to be used. Here we consulted the British Education Research Association's (BERA) ethical framework (2004), drafting our ethical guidelines from it and editing it through input and critique from colleagues, and lessons learned from prior research engagements. However, despite careful preparation, we experienced a range of dilemmas that we will share below. Cloke et al. (2000: 133) report similar experiences with their research among homeless people in England and state that this may be because theoretical information and preparation, sometimes becomes less clear and noticeably more personalised when imposed in a different context, removed from the one for which the ethical and methodological procedures were originally designed. Indeed, there has been polarised debate on which ethics and research practice should prevail. There are those supporting a universal code of research practice (deontological) and those who believe it should be contextual (consequential). A deontological approach posits that research principles should be welded together into a universal code of practice which should then be used to guide research regardless of the place or interpersonal circumstances in which researchers find themselves (Cloke et al., 2000: 134). Ellis (2007: 4) terms this as procedural ethics, 'the kind mandated by Institutional Review Board committees (IRB) to ensure procedures adequately deal with informed consent, confidentiality, rights to privacy, deception, and protecting human subjects from harm'. Hay (1998) contends that such a universal code is inflexible and discourages informed thought about research and ethical practice. Nevertheless, Johnson (1985: 265) argues that in so far as it is rigid, a universal code of practice provides a framework from which researchers can work, and this is evident also from BERA's (2004: 4) statement that the guidelines are to 'provide a basis for deliberation and perhaps resolution or compromise'. This, Johnson (1985: 265) adds, would need imagination and wit:

> The problem is to explain how it is possible to apply rationally derived general rules to specific actual situations encountered in our experience . . . deciding how we ought to act requires imagination and wit, if we are to determine which precepts are relevant to the case at hand and how those moral principles apply in the present context . . . only by drawing on this richer account of imagination, can we begin to be true to the actual process of moral deliberation.

This imaginative process of moral deliberation happens within the consequentialist approach (Cloke et al., 2000). This is an approach that spurns the rigidity of doctrinal rules in favour of adjusting research practices according to different contexts and the likely consequences of research therein. Our research is driven by a personal drive for social justice, a philosophical position concerned with empowerment, solving structural injustices, finding lasting solutions and facilitating agency, not only in individuals, but in the whole of society (Griffiths, 1998). Thus, it posits that the consequences of the

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research should be for the good of the participants and the people around them. This takes us a step further from the universal ethic 'doing no harm', to one of 'doing good', an outcome that is not a universal imperative, but adds a social justice strand to ethics, 'the ethics of responsibility to society' (Reese and Fremouw, 1984 as cited in Singleton and Straits, 2005: 515). In qualitative research, it is rarely possible to take account of all research related decisions *a priori*. The ethical and methodological issues arise and are shaped contextually, and are often addressed in a situated manner. Here, having a 'moral imagination' helps (Hay, 1998).

Werhane and Moriarty (2009), Moberg and Seabright (2000), and Johnson (1985) describe moral imagination as a reasoning process that helps a person (in this case, a researcher) reflect on the possibilities of actions to deal with a particular set of circumstances, as well as to envision and weigh the implications of these actions, that is, the potential help and/or harm that are likely to result from the action. Thus, the components of this psychological process include an awareness of the various dimensions embedded in a particular situation, in particular, the moral and ethical dimensions. Werhane and Moriarty (2009: 4) describe this moral imagination as being grounded in practice and distinguished by three characteristics. Firstly, it begins not with the general, but with a particular situation. Secondly, it entails the ability to disengage from one's primary framework or to extend or adapt that framework in a meaningful way; and thirdly, it deals not merely with fantasies but with possibilities or ideals that are viable and actualisable. Such possibilities, Werhane and Moriarty argue, have a normative or prescriptive character: they are concerned with what one *ought* to do.

Whilst philosophical positioning is clearly important, Moberg and Seabright (2000) stress that a researcher having moral sensitivity and good intentions is, by itself, not enough. Keen judgment, impassioned intent, skilful implementation to become a force for change, as well as transforming a moral insight into a moral solution, are also required. Furthermore, in translating thought into practice, Singleton and Straits (2005: 529) advise that 'the potential benefits of the research must be weighed against the potential costs'. Arguably then, a result of moral imagination should be adherence to the tenets of social justice.

The methodological approach

After presenting the background to our study and arguing the case for moral imagination in research that is interested in doing good, we now discuss our methodology. As Griffiths (1998) suggests, methodology provides a rationale for the way in which a researcher goes about getting knowledge; it is therefore more than a description of techniques or tools, as it provides reason for using such techniques in relation to the kind of knowledge that is being collected, developed or constructed. We therefore discuss in some detail the context of the research, as well as how and why various methodological decisions were taken.

Kajiado district and the Maasai

The research was undertaken in four primary schools in Kajiado District, Kenya. Kajiado district is located in the South of Kenya, towards the Tanzanian border, and

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though multi-cultural, is predominantly home to the Maasai community. In general, Maasai culture is centrally traditional and patriarchal, and vestiges remain of a way of life from hundreds of years ago. For example, some girls are circumcised from the age of eight and then married, resulting in a high drop-out rate from upper primary classes. One headmaster remarked, 'most men see women as only for procreation and pleasure'. Both men and women wear traditional dress of deep red cloth and some men carry spears. The women carry water, collect firewood, and build the houses (manyattas) made of cow dung and clay; houses that would be considered below par by modern standards (Phillips and Bhavnagri, 2002). Most Maasai in the region are nomadic herders, counting their wealth in cattle which they rarely slaughter or sell. Some hold the perception that formal education erodes the Maasai way of life, perhaps fearing that once their children receive education, they will become detached from the culture and community. This attitude is partly responsible for low levels of school enrolment for both boys and girls, though particularly for girls. Their nomadic lifestyle also makes children drop out of school as they move from place to place in search of pasture.

The physical and social environment

During fieldwork, observation and informal conversations with the participants were very helpful in understanding both the physical and social environment. Kajiado is a semi-arid area and the physical environment where the schools were situated was harsh and dry. At the start of the pilot in September 2009, Kajiado district (and Kenya at large) was experiencing a major drought. We drove through very dry, dusty and rocky terrain strewn with carcasses of livestock. We passed families of Maasai (men, women and children) guiding emaciated livestock in search of greener pastures. In sharp contrast, at the end of the pilot study in January 2010, heavy rains had fallen, making the roads to the schools virtually impassable as river banks had burst and flooded the roads. In fact on one of our trips, our car got stuck in the mud and local villagers helped push us out. The area was sparsely populated, and we drove for several kilometres without seeing a homestead. The primary schools we visited thus admitted children from a very wide catchment area, and during the interviews some girls talked about walking for up to 4 hours (one way) to get to school; for some this meant starting the journey as early as 4am.

The school environment also lacked resources with three to four children commonly sharing a desk and bench, and in two schools the teachers were few. Sometimes some lessons went untaught because of a lack of teachers, or teachers from the schools' kindergarten would assist in teaching. Infrastructure was also incomplete and dilapidated, such that in one school, for example, there was no door on the girls' toilet. This lack of privacy meant girls had to go to the toilet in groups in order to be able to watch out for each other. Lack of privacy in school toilets has been reported as causing girls to drop out of school (Elimu Yetu Coalition, 2005). However, through informal conversations with the teachers, we discussed together the discomfort girls felt because of the lack of a door and over the course of the research, a door was put up by the teachers. Harding and Norberg (2005: 2012) would describe this as researchers taking the opportunity to use their 'distinctive powers' on behalf of 'disadvantaged groups', an

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example of going beyond the principle of doing no harm, to one of doing good. In other words, it was an instance of taking Werhane and Moriarty's (2009: 4) advice, to 'disengage from one's primary framework or extend or adapt that framework in a meaningful way'.

Selection of participants

Four representative schools were chosen for study, with the assistance of the local District Education Officer (DEO) and Forum for African Women Educationalists – Kenya (FAWE-K). The schools were chosen on the basis that they were known to retain girls 'against the odds', and were also dispersed across the district; three were mixed and one was a girls' school. We took advantage of the teachers' local and personal knowledge, relying on them to identify girls who were in school against the odds. We stressed that the girls need not be their best pupils academically, but that the key determinant for selection was that they were facing a myriad of challenges and problems that threatened their continued participation in school. Teachers were given a week to select pupils, after which the researchers visited the school and met the girls. In total we interviewed 24 girls, all from the Maasai community. Though they were in Class 5 of primary school (when pupils would be expected to be aged 11), their ages ranged from 11 to 15 years, reflecting late starts and disrupted education. Eight teachers also participated in informal conversations with the two researchers.

Data collection and analysis

Qualitative data were gathered through key informant semi-structured interviews with the girls (in English or Swahili, according to their preference), as well as observations, note-taking and photography of the schools and surrounding environs. Interview questions were devised on the basis of an understanding of the factors affecting girls' participation in education in Sub-Saharan Africa, as gained through the kinds of studies reviewed by Hunt (2008), and already alluded to above. Although beginning with a theoretical understanding of some of the issues, our approach was both deductive and inductive, starting with certain ideas, but being open to what the data revealed. In developing an interview guide which allowed considerable scope for taking the interview in the direction led by the interviewee, we began from a feminist epistemology which rejects 'notions of rational objectivity implied in the separation of researcher and researched, and instead emphasise[s] reflexivity and the positioning of the researcher in the research process' (Fawcett and Hearn, 2004: 206). Such a perspective, has a strong concern for reflexivity, taking account of power relations and responsibility in research, considering ways in which knowledge is 'created' and keeping participants' welfare to the forefront (Sampson et al., 2008).

Observation and photography were very insightful and enabled us to build a vivid social and environmental context in which the schools existed. We observed the harsh environment in which the schools and homes were located, for example. This helped put into perspective the rough terrain that the girls walked through when they came to school and also the harsh drought and lack of water and food that they and their families

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experienced. We also engaged in informal conversations with the teachers, which were helpful in enriching our data, enabling us to understand more fully the gender dynamics in the communities and the background factors impacting upon girls' everyday lives, their education and their general wellbeing.

At the start of every interview, each girl was briefed on the project and given the ethical guidelines to read in her preferred language (either English or Swahili). We then asked her to tell us in her own words what she had read and if she needed any clarification. It was important for us to establish that each girl had understood the guidelines fully, especially because they were in a second language, their first language being Maasai. We stressed that participation was voluntary and that she would not get into trouble with us or the teachers if she refused to participate. As BERA (2004: 5) guidelines state:

> Researchers must take the steps necessary to ensure that all participants in the research understand the process in which they are to be engaged, including why their participation is necessary, how it will be used and how and to whom it will be reported.

All agreed to take part, and some were very excited to talk to us; even the shy ones smiled and seemed curious. However, as will be discussed later, their agreeing to participate cannot entirely be attributed to the participatory consent process, since issues of power and positionality are clearly pertinent. We asked for permission to record the interviews, assuring the girls of confidentiality and anonymity with no individual data being traced back to them. Indeed, we eventually used pseudonyms for the girls and the schools. At the end of the interview, we offered the girls a chance to ask us questions. Some of their questions were based on career advice, what we would do with their data, how we could help them materially or even how to escape their villages because they feared circumcision, and when would we visit them again. The practical research related questions were easier to answer, for example, describing to them the data analysis and writing process, and the consequent sharing of their data with relevant stakeholders, with the aim of improving education quality and opportunity for children like them.

It was harder to answer the more personal questions like the possibility of taking them with us so that they escape circumcision, early marriage and consequent school drop-out. We consoled them and avoided making promises, but later in the article we show how we contributed materially to their wellbeing. At the end of the interviews, we presented each girl with a token gift of an exercise book and two pens. The pupils had no expectation or prior knowledge regarding these gifts, since we needed to reduce the likelihood of bias, with the girls getting excited and telling us what they thought we wanted to hear in exchange for a present.

Preceding analysis, data were first transcribed with those in Swahili translated into English. The first author, who is conversant with both languages, read the transcriptions to ensure little meaning was lost from the original conversations. Data were then imported into NVivo8 software and coded in recurring themes. Patterns and explanations among the themes were inferred. However, the key focus of this article is to present some of the ethical and methodological complexities that we faced when collecting the data, and how

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we used moral imagination to make ethical decisions, rather than to describe the actual research findings.

Ethical and methodological complexities faced

This section reflects on the ethical and methodological complexities faced when researching with girls against the odds in Kajiado. They include positionality and power, confidentiality, and examples of personal involvement and advocacy, each of which is discussed below.

Positionality and power

Because the research involved what is sometimes known as 'interviewing down', that is, among those less powerful (economically, politically, socially) than us (Patai, 1991: 137 as cited in Khan, 2005: 2027),[1] we had anticipated the obvious power imbalance and asymmetrical interaction between the participants and ourselves. The teachers especially were very much aware of the status of the field researchers (as earlier mentioned, data collection was done by the first author with the assistance of an academic based at a local university); that we were affiliated to universities in Kenya and the UK, and held academic titles. They found it hard to call us by our first names and addressed us by these titles. Some teachers could identify with the Kenyan University because they were pursuing diplomas and degrees there, and after the interviews they asked about their courses and how they could perform well in them. Others were curious as to how one went about studying abroad as the first author had done. So, as much as we were there to undertake research, we were also seen as a link to improving the teachers' qualifications through the university. As Nama and Swartz (2002) put it, we represented to them a source of help and a connection to a better world outside. Thus, our conversations were saturated with conflicting expectations and assumptions. Whereas we constructed the teachers and pupils as sources of social knowledge, they constructed us as people who were enabled and who would provide access to a better future. We found ourselves sharing tips about being successful in higher education and the application process. Adopting the perspective of moral imagination (what one ought to do), made us take on board a 'more than a researcher' role. We therefore entered the research relationship believing that each had something to offer (Harding and Norberg, 2005; Riessman, 2005). Caplan (1993 as cited in Riessman, 2005: 480) urges researchers to ask, 'Who are we for them? Who are they for us?' stating that asking such questions forces researchers to interrogate themselves in research relationships, and this is an approach we attempted to take.

Whilst as already discussed, we negotiated a process of informed consent with our research participants, informed consent in this poor community was different from what might normally be regarded as consent in western contexts, in that it followed a chain of command. For example, after getting permission from the Ministry of Education and District Education Officer, we met the head teachers and it was through them that we came to meet the teachers and pupils. This chain of negotiating entry varies across contexts and shows that gaining permission is not always a one off event. This bears

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methodological implications to researchers wanting to work in the Global South, although collaborating with local researchers, as we did, helps to bridge these different methodological circumstances as they are obviously more aware of local protocol.

All of the head teachers and teachers were very responsive and pleased that we had chosen to work with their schools. We appreciated this warm welcome but we have had experiences elsewhere where even if teachers have been open to a study, they have asked critical questions about our intentions and how they will benefit from the study. Here it was different, and at times we wondered whether their unquestioning acceptance was partly because of the power issue or perhaps a culture that obeyed 'authority' without question. We were highly educated, affiliated to influential universities, and had the backing of the Ministry of Education. Similarly, all the girls also agreed to participate with no resistance, but though we tried to follow procedures for obtaining informed consent, we wondered about the extent to which their consent was voluntary or coerced, because the head teacher and ourselves were 'power figures'. Khan (2005), who interviewed Pakistani women facing sex charges, writes about being constantly reminded of inequalities between her, a professional academic, and the incarcerated women who were often illiterate and unemployed. She ended up being unsure as to what the interview conversations meant to the women and the motive behind their participation. A key question here, then, would be: who is in control in research? Griffiths (1998) and Harding and Norberg (2005) argue that it is the researcher who is ultimately in control, with the power to decide what to do with the data and which parts of it will be used. Griffiths (1998) writes that eventually the researcher is the one to exercise his/her ethical standards on participants' ideas. This raises questions over the meaning of consent, when Riessman (2005), for example, queries whether consent has been fully understood when the participant agrees to take part in a process whose eventual product he or she cannot imagine.

Selection of the girls also had its challenges. Despite discussing with the teachers our criteria in choosing the girls as discussed above, some teachers still selected their 'best' students from well to-do-families, perhaps in a bid to impress us because of how they perceived our 'power and position'. For example, one girl's father was a senior civil servant and owned a car, and the family cooked using gas, which was highly unusual in this community, and a sign of affluence. Although we did interview this girl, we asked the teachers to help choose another girl who more fully met our criteria. This meant additional interviews on our part and is a good example of how our participant selection was 'a back and forth process', unique to the circumstances and adapted from our original research design where we assumed the teachers would select pupils according to the criteria we gave them. We needed imagination and wit to make quick decisions that would enrich our data. Furthermore, because of the various challenges our interviewees faced, most had started school late or dropped out for periods of time. However, the teachers found it difficult to tell us that the girls would be older, perhaps because they were embarrassed or worried about disappointing us. In three of the four schools, teachers affirmed that their girls were 11 years old, only for us to realise that they were older during the interviews. Teachers overlooked the fact that we would still be interested in an older girl, especially to find out the circumstances that had made her lag behind in school.

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Power relations were also reflected in the stark difference of wealth between us and the school participants. For example, because of the very rough terrain, we arrived in the kind of car that in all probability none of the teachers or parents of the pupils could ever hope to own. We also had bottled water, whilst as we were to discover, the girls we interviewed were experiencing first-hand the consequences of a severe drought. This striking difference in position is evident from the following dialogue between 14-year-old Naisola and the interviewer:

Interviewer: What don't you like in school?
Naisola: Because it has not rained, there is no water.
Interviewer: So where do you get your water?
Naisola: If it has not rained, the train brings us water but leaves it at the station and we go and carry it. I come from home, I get into class, but when it reaches 7 am sharp, we go for water from the train.[2]

As the conversation was progressing, we were struck by the realisation that our water bottles were on the table, a situation that was likely to have been uncomfortable for the girls since they lacked water. This is an example of situations not necessarily anticipated, with the researcher unable to prepare for every eventuality. Through a moral imagination process, the two authors deliberated on this issue in hindsight, deciding that on future occasions we would either leave our water bottles in the car, or take enough water to share with our participants. We did take some groceries to the schools, such as loaves of fresh bread and other foods like fruits which were very hard to come by in these remote schools. This was also a cultural gesture since it is appreciated when a visitor brings 'milk and bread'. However, the gifts of 'hard to come by foods' may also have aggravated the power imbalance. Such instances go beyond a formal ethical framework designed in, and for, northern contexts.

In order to minimise disparities of power, we did our best to behave in a way that was as culturally aware as possible. For example, we dressed very simply, in a similar style to that of the female teachers. We also adopted a friendly disposition and conversed in Swahili, only speaking in English if the other person appeared comfortable with that. Though using the local language helped develop trust and to be seen as 'one of them' (Griffiths, 1998: 40) we were still seen as having 'superior' knowledge (Lynch, 1999). Lynch (1999: 15) describes this as an ironical situation, in that, despite our efforts to fit in we still presented 'dominance'. Perhaps an ethnographic stay in the community would have helped better in overcoming power dynamics, but time and resource constraints did not allow this.

Confidentiality and child protection

We faced our biggest dilemma with issues surrounding confidentiality. During the interviews, we learned of situations that were potentially harmful, in that some girls said that Morans (young Maasai men who are circumcised and thus seen as men and ready for marriage) chased and attempted to rape them during the long walks to and from school. The following dialogue illustrates such an exchange:

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Interviewer: What problems have you encountered when coming to school?
Reisson: We come at 5 am, sometimes at 4 am. When we are coming there are some Morans who want to trap us: they tried to rape me, I ran. . . . If they catch you, they will rape you.
Interviewer: Do you know of anyone who has been caught?
Reisson: Yes, she got pregnant, dropped out to give birth, and was married off to that Moran.

We became more concerned when we realised, through conversation with several girls, that nothing seemed to be done about this. The mothers seemed to lack the power to take action, and the Morans ran away to avoid reprisal:

Interviewer: Ok. Have you ever told the teachers or your parents that there are Morans out there chasing after girls?
Panata: Yes, I have told my mother and she said, 'I don't know what we will do'.
Interviewer: Why are these Morans being let alone?
Panata: When they know that they are being looked for, they run away for good.

Another example of a situation that gave as ethical dilemmas was the sleeping arrangements in some of the homes, because the girls would be sent out of the house when the father came in the evening. Among some Maasai, it is taboo for a father and daughter to sleep under the same roof, and some families still uphold this practice. Traditionally, this arrangement was to shield them from witnessing sexual intercourse between the parents. As Sanapei, a 13-year-old girl explained:

Sanapei: When I finish cooking, there is nowhere for me to sleep [because] my father will come and my mother will tell me 'you go and look for a place to sleep'.
Interviewer: Why is there nowhere for you to sleep?
Sanapei: Mum's house has only a bed for her and father.

After hearing this, we were faced with an ethical dilemma because though we had promised the girls not to discuss their data with anyone, we felt that their safety was at risk and eventually spoke to some teachers without mentioning the girls' names. Most of the teachers had grown up in the area and gone to the same primary school and were very much aware of the traditional sleeping arrangements, and the rape incidences. They said that constant dialogue with community members would be needed to break these culturally embedded perceptions. On reflection we realised that because of our fear for the girls' safety, we had broken confidentiality. We decided to take this as a lesson learned during this pilot phase, but should a similar situation arise during the larger study, we would renegotiate consent and ask the girl for her permission to share her information with a person in authority. For example, 'I am really worried about what you have told me. I think we should share it with someone who can help you. Who do you think I can

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share it with?' As a result of this experience, the authors reflected retrospectively with the help of other colleagues and agreed to bring teachers into the research at the outset to enable us to discuss such sensitive cultural issues in an open space, and to enhance our awareness of the cultural nuances pertinent to the environments in which our participants spent their daily lives.

Personal involvement and advocacy

After understanding the hardships that the girls faced, we found it very difficult not to empathise and become emotionally involved. Some girls cried during interviews when they recounted their problems. For example, Tisai, a 12-year-old girl, cried when she remembered how her mother earned a pittance from working on other people's farms to get money to feed them. Tears came to 14-year-old Toluna's eyes, when she talked about how girls were circumcised against their will. It emerged later, that Toluna had been forcefully circumcised (Naisola reported this during her interview). It was difficult as researchers not to feel responsible for making them cry, wondering if we had pushed too far in our eagerness to probe, and it was hard to console them fully, an action that made us cross over from researcher to friend. As Riessman (2005: 474) says, 'in particular contexts in interaction . . . conversation between teller and listener . . . make demands on participants to say more'. Listeners (in this case the researchers), in turn, can be deeply affected by the narrative they hear, experiencing emotions that are sometimes difficult to bear. Cloke et al. (2000: 145) summarise it thus:

> The researcher takes the role of a sympathetic listener . . . it is not possible to enter other people's worlds in a sanitised fashion, however much we would try to do so. The very process of inviting ourselves in as outsiders carries with it inherent discomfort and fears, which demand safe research practices, but also erodes just a little the protective socio-positional armour with which we often surround ourselves . . . complexity of relations involving power, discomfort and fear.

These emotions can be coupled with 'a real sense of impotence and inadequacy at not being able to do much, if anything, of immediate material benefit', for poor research participants (Cloke et al., 2000: 145). This can lead to a sense of inadequacy, such that Cloke et al. questioned the point of their research, and what difference it actually made to the people who were sharing their lives with the researchers. These authors remind us, therefore, that 'distancing', that is, separating work from personal life, can be difficult, adding that often, discomfort stems from an acute realisation of the difference between our powerful, affluent and 'problem-free' lifestyles and the plight of our interviewees.

However, empathising with the participants can propel researchers to contribute materially to their struggles. For example, the first author undertook a sponsored climb of Mount Kenya to raise some funds for a dormitory, in response to pleas from girls in one school that a dormitory would save them from walking long distances and also protect them from Morans. It would also relieve them of heavy chores at home, giving them more time for study. She also took up an invitation from Tisai to attend the school's open day, taking along edible treats for the girls. The second author has bought pens for all the pupils of the four participating schools, because we noticed pupils having to share pens.

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These are examples of the use of moral imagination to do good in research. As Werhane and Moriarty (2009: 4) suggest, this is about putting ourselves into the shoes and experiences of others. Other researchers have also discussed their emotional involvement and material interventions. Riessman (2005: 483) contributed money for buying hospital equipment in India. Khan (2005: 2030) organised workshops to enlighten women about violence against women and suicide prevention in Pakistan. Universal ethical frameworks suggest that such practices may create bias in participant selection or responses, but reflection upon the experiences and context that researchers may find in poor communities, begs for a need to transcend such universal frameworks.

Perhaps the immediate benefit that the girls experienced was that the research gave them a voice. Most of them voiced their appreciation at being given a chance to tell their story, stating that no one had ever asked them their views in such a way before. As Greig and Taylor (1999) have observed, the assumption has been that children are unable or un-entitled to have a point of view. They also felt inspired through interacting with 'successful women' (the researchers), saying that they too would make it to university, get good jobs and be financially independent. This research therefore helped them 'reclaim a measure of agency through participation' (Khan, 2005: 2029). So far we have shared their (anonymous) voices with relevant stakeholders from the Ministry of Education, Non-Governmental Organisations, the schools' heads and teachers, and academic colleagues. Ensuing dialogue has led us to negotiate for sustainable interventions such a sanitary towel provision and exposure to successful women to mentor them. We feel that is important to involve the schools in the negotiations of identifying an appropriate intervention, since they know best what they need, while the researchers know to what extent they are able to give help. All in all, we believe it is imperative for researchers to contribute in whatever way possible (material and/or non-material), not because they will benefit professionally from publishing participants' data, but because of the imperative of a social justice agenda.

Conclusion

This article offers a contribution to other literature on the dilemmas faced by researchers working amongst disadvantaged communities within the global South. In it we have reflected on the ethics and methodological complexities faced in a pilot study undertaken in Kajiado, Kenya, involving girls 'against the odds'. We have argued that during fieldwork in contexts very different from those generally experienced in northern countries, various situations arise which cannot be anticipated in advance of any fieldwork. In such situations formally constructed frameworks of research ethics may prove inadequate, and on-the-spot decision-making is demanded.

The examples discussed here in relation to positionality and power relations, confidentiality, and personal involvement and advocacy, have shown how a process of moral imagination was used *in situ*, and sometimes with hindsight, when dealing with 'the unpredictable, often subtle, yet ethically important moments that come up in the field' (Ellis, 2007: 4). As a result of these experiences, we argue for a consequential approach to research ethics, one that takes cognisance of the context and environment in which research is undertaken, and which cannot be fully planned in advance. This we believe is

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essential if researchers are to not only avoid harm to those who participate in their research, but to make some small positive differences to their lives.

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Notes

1. In contrast, Harding and Norberg (2005: 2011) talk about prioritising ‘studying up’, that is, studying the powerful, their institutions, policies, and practices instead of focusing only on those whom the powerful govern.
2. The water which came by train was donated by a local mining company because of the drought. It came twice a week and the children had to carry it to the school, a distance of approximately 700m in each direction. This water, though much appreciated, was never enough.

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