

Protecting the participant's identity in small community research

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ABSTRACT

Social researchers have extensively discussed ethical issues to ensure accountability in protecting participants' identities during research. However, the literature offers limited guidance on how to protect participants' identity when researching with small communities. Ethical considerations extend beyond merely obtaining ethics approval for conducting research; instead, it is critical to manage what happens in the field of research and how the researcher manages whatever arises. This paper addresses this gap, by outlining the steps needed to protect participants' identities during a research project with a small group of Maldivians. In the original research, a qualitative approach was employed with a small group of eleven Maldivian teacher educators. Data were gathered using semi structured interviews, observation, focus group discussions, and hanging out approaches in two circles. The data were triangulated through the two circles and analysis was carried out based on grounded theory. The Maldives has a small population, and the community of teacher educators is even smaller. Issues of participant identity and how to protect it during data collection and publications were complex, requiring careful and mindful planning. For instance, some participants inadvertently or deliberately revealed themselves to peers. Understanding the complexities of these ethical issues can provide valuable insights for other researchers in similar contexts. The paper is intended to add to what is known about the practicalities of applying codes of ethics in small community contexts.

Keywords: Ethics, Small community research, Protecting participants

1. INTRODUCTION

Research ethics in small communities are particularly complex due to the heightened risks of compromising participant confidentiality and anonymity. In small populations, individuals are more easily identified based on the specificity of their context or experiences, even when direct identifiers are removed. Kaiser (2009) argues that ensuring confidentiality in qualitative research is often more challenging in these settings because participants may share unique characteristics that make them easily identifiable. Wiles et al. (2008) emphasize that researchers need to go beyond standard ethical practices to protect identities, which may include withholding or altering some contextual details that could indirectly reveal a

participant's identity. Moreover, researchers must navigate the dual ethical obligation of maintaining confidentiality while ensuring the community feels represented and respected. This often involves a delicate balance between transparency about the research goals and protecting sensitive information that could potentially harm participants or disrupt community dynamics.

Additionally, research with small communities requires a deep understanding of local contexts, values, and norms to ensure ethical conduct and positive outcomes for the participants. According to Israel and Hay (2006), ethical research in such settings is not just about adhering to regulatory frameworks but also about fostering trust, reciprocity, and mutual respect between

researchers and the community. This approach can help mitigate feelings of exploitation or alienation, which are common concerns in research involving marginalized or close-knit groups. Hennink and Hutter (2020) further highlight the importance of community engagement and participatory approaches, where community members are actively involved in the research process, from design to dissemination. This collaboration helps in aligning the research objectives with community priorities and ensures that findings are relevant and beneficial to the participants. Thus, ethical research in small communities demands an adaptive, context-sensitive approach that goes beyond mere compliance, fostering a more equitable and respectful research relationship.

Taking account of ethical considerations in any research endeavour is imperative. Ethics are guidelines and principles that serve good professional practice in conducting research (Bloor & Wood, 2006). Damianakis and Woodford (2012) argue that qualitative researchers find it difficult to maintain confidentiality and anonymity when conducting studies with small, connected communities. They further suggest that existing relationships among community members can become complex, potentially creating unanticipated challenges when researchers try to protect research participants' identities.

Some researchers use a range of terms to define small communities, such as "small connected communities" (Bloor & Wood, 2006), "small group" (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001), "small and close knit Native communities" (Quigley, 2006), "geographically bounded and tightly knit" communities" (Ellis, 2007) "small sized communities" (McGrath, 2006) and "small states and territories"... , "closely networked society" or "tightly networked society" (Morrison, 2006, pp. 252-254). The common idea implicit in these descriptors is that of intimacy: that members of these communities know each other well, and are strongly connected -- perhaps through kinship, interests, work or community involvement. The

researchers cited all note ethical challenges that may arise for researchers working in closely knit and small communities.

Morrison (2006) argued that when conducting research in a small community, news travels fast, potentially undermining efforts at ensuring anonymity and confidentiality, saying that when "a researcher is working in a school, [it] quickly becomes public knowledge" (Morrison, 2006, p. 252). In referring to an example of a small community research in the Maldives, Moosa (2013) says that taking account of ethical principles of anonymity is complex, as most people know each other. More specifically, as very few have undertaken research of a social science nature, locals are not very familiar with the ethical standards that bind social science research. This becomes especially complex when the authorising institution granting this permission is an overseas university, more used to granting approval for research being conducted in communities within its own country. In the Maldives for example, potential participants do not consider disclosing their identities as problematic, but something to be proud of. Some, therefore, may openly disclose to others in the community, about their role in the research project. This creates great challenges to the researcher and the research process when it comes to protecting participants' identities in a research context.

This paper addresses the community intimacy at the research site and the steps researcher took when participants chose to reveal themselves to peers. The paper outlines steps taken to protect participants' identities during this research project with a small group of Maldivian teacher educators. Maldives has a small population, and the community of teacher educators is even smaller. Issues of participant identity and how to protect that in data collection and publications were complex, which required manoeuvring and careful, mindful planning.

Many universities require that potential research projects gain ethics approval before any

research with people begins. In the case of this research, ethical approval from the University of Waikato was sought and granted prior to the research endeavour. The project itself is more than the gaining of this ethics approval. It requires a researcher to be mindful and respectful through the periods when participants contribute data to it. Macfarlane (2010) for example, argues that taking account of ethical considerations is not simply gaining ethics approval for conducting a research study; rather it involves what happens in the field of research and how the researcher manages whatever arises.

Dahlquist (2006) describes two important aspects in this regard: research ethics and a researcher's ethics. Research ethics involves rules and considerations that researchers need to observe while conducting research, whereas researcher's ethics relates to moral obligations such as honesty and objectivity when presenting and interpreting findings. Linking both research ethics and researcher ethics, Freeman (2011) presents five ethical principles for researchers to evaluate when making decisions: respect for autonomy (respecting the human capacity of self-determination), beneficence (doing good or acting for the benefit of others), non-maleficence (doing no harm), justice (fairness in deciding the rights and deserts), and fidelity (being honest with and respectful of participants and to the data). Some of these principles such as respecting participants' autonomy, doing no harm, and being honest and respectful are pertinent to the small community group that took part in the research. Along with these ideas an ethical framework for the research was outlined and briefly explained.

2. ETHICAL FRAMEWORK FOR RESEARCH ETHICS IN SMALL COMMUNITIES

Ethical considerations are paramount when conducting research in small communities, where close social ties and overlapping relationships pose unique challenges. The proposed framework for

research ethics in small communities is outlined in Figure 1. The framework includes four core ethical principles: autonomy, confidentiality, integrity, and justice. Autonomy ensures that participants have the right to make voluntary decisions about their involvement in research, free from coercion or undue influence (Mikesell et al., 2013). Confidentiality is particularly challenging in small universities where individuals are more likely to recognize each other; therefore, researchers must implement rigorous anonymization techniques and secure data protection measures (Taylor & Pagliari, 2017). Integrity requires transparency and trust between researchers and the community, emphasizing ethical responsibility rather than viewing ethical considerations as optional (Shore et al., 2011). Justice ensures fair representation, equitable partnerships, and the avoidance of exploitation, which is essential in small communities where power imbalances can be more pronounced (Rogers & Kelly, 2011).

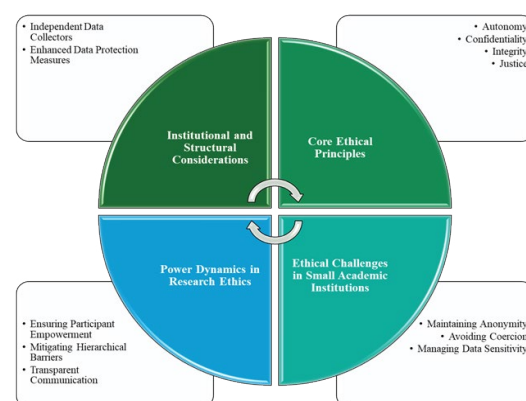


Figure 1. Framework for Research Ethics

The framework also highlights the ethical challenges that may arise in small academic institutions such as a specific institute, including maintaining anonymity, avoiding coercion, and managing data sensitivity. Unlike large institutions, where participants can remain relatively unknown, small communities require enhanced strategies to protect participant identities (Cassar & Bartolo, 2021). Faculty-led research poses a risk of implicit coercion, as students may feel obligated to participate due to perceived power dynamics

(Barsky, 2019). To address these challenges, researchers must ensure informed consent is truly voluntary and develop ethical literacy programs to help faculty and students navigate these complex issues. Additionally, the risk of informal discussions leading to unintentional data breaches requires strict confidentiality agreements and ethical training to prevent the inadvertent sharing of sensitive information.

The framework also outlines the power dynamic issue as an important concept for this research. To mitigate power imbalances and strengthen ethical oversight, this framework incorporates institutional safeguards such as independent data collectors, ethical literacy programs, and enhanced data protection measures. Independent data collectors help minimise bias and reduce conflicts of interest (Brown et al., 2010), while ethical literacy programs provide guidance on ethical dilemmas specific to small communities (Mikesell et al., 2013). Secure data storage, anonymization techniques, and restricted access help protect sensitive information and maintain participant confidentiality (Taylor & Pagliari, 2017). By integrating these components, the framework ensures that research in small communities upholds ethical integrity, transparency, and social responsibility, fostering trust between researchers and participants while addressing the unique ethical challenges of closely connected academic environments.

3. BACKGROUND OF THE RESEARCH

The research data generation phase used here to illustrate some of the complexities of fieldwork ethics, took place in the Maldives. The Maldives is a small country with a population of 393,988 (Ali, Cullen, & Toland, 2013). Most of the population is Muslim and has developed cultural practices resulting from both their religious background and the isolation inherent in being an island nation. The research participants were teacher educators recruited from the only university in the Maldives at the time of this research. Of the fifteen teacher

educators formally approached, twelve volunteered as the research participants. A total of 49 teacher educators were employed at the university at the time of data collection; the research group thus represented approximately a fifth of the academic staff members.

The overarching research question was how teacher educators' pedagogical and technological (use of digital technologies) practices were formed within their Maldivian culture. In answering the main research question, the researcher applied an ethnographic approach to generate data through in-depth interviews, observation of classroom teaching, focus group discussions and 'hanging out' with participants. This took place over about eleven weeks. Creswell (2007) argues that to explore what participants say and experience in the actual context, a qualitative researcher tries "to get as close as possible to the participants being studied" (p. 18). The researcher was involved with teacher educators in their daily activities. This allowed her to learn about their experiences, incidents, and events associated with their pedagogical practice and knowledge development. Wood (1986) asserts that an ethnographer aims "to represent the reality, [which] studies in all its various layers of social meanings in its full richness" (p. 5). For the researcher, it was imperative to collect whatever meanings, experiences, beliefs or interpretations that teacher educators shared. These data were valuable for understanding teacher educators' pedagogical practices in the Maldives.

The main themes for reporting the findings were generated through various strategies related to grounded theory. Grounded theory is a qualitative analysis approach. It includes inductively generating ideas, developing a coding process (looking for keywords from data), and constant comparison, or cross-checking (Strauss, 1987). Grbich (2013) explains that grounded theory in this way helps a researcher to capture an in-depth understanding of data from which new knowledge is theorised. For example, when the researcher learnt about participants' concentration

on delivering information in the initial phase of data collection, the idea was discussed in the subsequent focus groups with participants. This discussion further clarified the understanding about this finding. Later, these ideas were again discussed with participants in follow-up interviews.

Conducting an ethnographic study focusing on an in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives and practices while also seeking an immersive experience of being in 'the same boat', was a big challenge when it came to protecting participants' identities in this small participant community. Other staff members who were not research participants saw me hanging out daily with the participant teacher educators. More specifically, all the participants already knew each other for a long time, interacting with each other on both personal and professional levels. In addition, their ongoing interactions and the general discussions around their participation in the research meant that there were no secrets between them. This created potentially difficult ethical issues during the data collection period. It was no secret to other faculty staff members who the participants were.

Figure 1 portrays the 'smallness' of the participant group involved in the research. The Figure illustrates how each participant could easily be identified if certain steps or principles were not followed in protecting participants' identities.

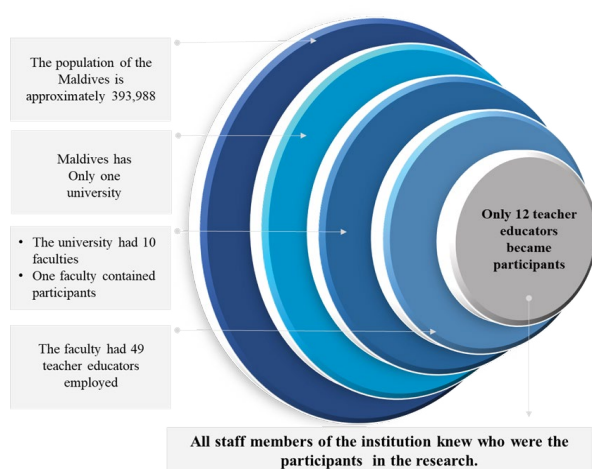


Figure 2. The 'smallness' of the participant group.

Merriam (1998) argues that ethical dilemmas in qualitative research are most likely to emerge from the data collection and the reporting of the findings. Ethics are, therefore, associated with the researcher's everyday actions and decisions made to uphold the ethical standards that the research was approved for (Bloor & Wood, 2006). Mondada (2014) asserts that researchers' actions in the actual research process play an important role when protecting participants' identities. This set of actions requires careful thought and strategies.

4. ETHICS RELATED CONCERNS

The research focused on understanding how teacher educators used digital technologies in their teaching and the extent to which their cultural background or early childhood experiences influenced their practices. The researcher's intention was not to single out any teacher educator but understand what led them to act as they did when they taught. The researcher, therefore, did not want to make examples of anyone who may have unconsciously disregarded proven pedagogical and theoretical practices when using digital technologies in teaching. This aspect of the research became more problematic as findings indicated a strong habitus embodied the way participants taught and practised with digital technologies. This issue and the findings were discussed with the participants. However, none of them agreed that what appeared to be a strong habitus based on religious methods of Qur'anic recitation, rather than pedagogical theory, was leading to their practices becoming more transmission than anything else. Following this discussion with research participants on the findings, the researcher decided not to redouble efforts to hide participants' identities. The main goal was to ensure that even if other staff members read the findings, they would be unable to identify individuals and potentially compromise their professional reputations. Although the research did not cause any physical harm to the participants, the potential emotional harm involving teacher educators' reputations being compromised was of

real concern. Protecting participants' identities was important to the researcher, if she was to maintain respect and do no harm.

The complexities of maintaining ethical standards in research involving small communities, such as teacher educators, have also been explored in recent studies. Huber and Clandinin (2019) highlight the relational ethics involved in such research, where the researcher must navigate the delicate balance between insider knowledge and ethical distance. This aligns with the researcher's reflections in the provided text, where self-positioning as both a researcher and participant required a nuanced understanding of the participants' lived experiences and identities. Further, O'Toole et al. (2019) underscore the importance of safeguarding participant confidentiality and navigating power dynamics, especially when the research findings may challenge participants' self-perceptions or professional reputations. These insights imply that researchers working within small communities must consider the potential long-term consequences of their work on participants' identities and professional standing, as well as their own. The ethical imperative is not just about adhering to codes of conduct but also about fostering trust, empathy, and respect for the complex realities of those being studied. The next part explains the principles observed and steps taken to maintain ethical obligations to protect participants' identities.

5. THE PRINCIPLES OBSERVED AND STEPS TAKEN TO PROTECT PARTICIPANTS

Protecting participants from harm is a moral and ethical obligation that any social science researcher is required to observe during the whole research process. It is a way of ensuring that participants' collected data will not be exploited to cause harm, just as Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007) remind researchers to uphold an ethical and moral responsibility to protect participants. Participation in social science research may potentially affect or

cause humiliation, embarrassment, loss of respect and self-respect and other emotional discomfort, even if inadvertent (Given, 2008; Stake, 2010). This is why it is crucial to avoid harm where possible.

Confidentiality and anonymity issues are closely linked with the right of participants to protection. These two aspects are part of the foremost promise a researcher must offer when recruiting potential participants. Although confidentiality and anonymity are two terms frequently referred to together, they have different meanings and become applied differently when researchers are in the field. The two concepts (confidentiality and anonymity) can be thought of as two sides of the same coin. Mondada (2014) states that "... anonymization is often mentioned as an argument and a guarantee for convincing the informants" (p. 185) that their shared information does not put them at risk. Wiles, Crow, Heath, and Charles (2008) explain that confidentiality involves keeping the shared experiences and the information private between the researcher and the participant. Anonymity on the other hand, refers to the actions that researchers use to protect the identity of participants when their data is quoted in any research outputs, such as presentations, articles, or in a thesis. In this research, a range of different ways to practise anonymisation and confidentiality were implemented throughout the data generation period and during analysis and reporting of findings as demonstrated in Figure 3.

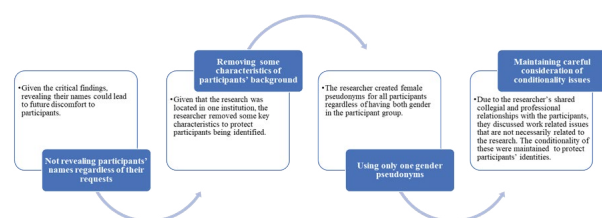


Figure 3. Steps and ways implemented to protect participants' identities

At first, research participants did not take confidentiality and anonymity seriously. In their workplace, where everybody met and interacted with one another daily, they revealed their participation to others. Some participants even wanted to use their own names instead of pseudonyms. Many researchers would argue about participants' intention to reveal their identity (Jones, 2011; Ntseane, 2009; Wiles et al., 2008). For example, Jones (2011) chose to reveal his participants' identities regardless of the small communities involved in his research. He addressed this aspect by stating that participants "were positive about the research, willing to be named and many expressed an interest in having their voices, and the stories of their communities, included" (p. 79). Given the smallness of the participant group, regardless of their requests to reveal their identities, the researcher did not disclose any of the participants' original names or identity to fulfil the ethical obligations towards them. The researcher thought that identifying them could harm their academic reputation with colleagues and students. For example, other staff members may criticise their practices as teacher educators. After all, they supposedly demonstrate and model good practices when using digital technologies in teaching and learning, for their students who will, in turn, undertake teaching in schools.

Morse and Coulehan (2015) argue that a researcher's actions regarding ethical decisions ought to be decided based on participants' perspectives of the findings. In a later phase of this research, some preliminary findings were cross-checked with participants. The researcher sought to know what they thought about the descriptions of their practices. Participants' perspectives about their practices were remarkably different from what the findings indicated. They disagreed with the finding about the strong cultural habitus that appeared to be embodied in their practices. However, most of the participants' arguments suggested that because the habitus driving their pedagogical practices was so deeply ingrained, they

could not see it clearly. Participants, therefore, were displeased at being confronted with this finding. While Morse and Coulehan (2015) assert that a researcher's actions in such instances should focus on ensuring participants' protection from harm, the researcher however, could not ignore what the findings revealed. The researcher wondered if their reactions indicated what often happens when anyone must 'see' themselves differently -- that our own pictures of ourselves as professionals is fraught with ego rather than self-knowledge.

Second, as mentioned earlier, the research involved a group of teacher educators in one institution. If the institution is known, it may not take someone long to identify them. Wiles et al. (2008) argue that managing confidentiality and anonymity issues may be challenging when researching in an organisation in which participant identity may not be able to be completely anonymised. As a result, many researchers change key characteristics of participants if they find that specific background information could lead to their identification. Although the institution's name was not mentioned in the research, at the time of the research, there was only one university in the country. For this reason, to distance participants from potential discovery, the researcher changed or removed some key characteristics to protect participants from being identified. Mondada (2014), for example, had substituted a participant's name and changed some descriptions of the research location/site to better anonymise participants.

Third, as this research involved gathering data from a predominantly female group, revealing an individual's gender might lead someone else to identifying some of the research participants. For this reason, the researcher created female pseudonyms for all participants (though there were two males). This strategy thus masked the entire participant group for it made it easier to muddy individuals' characteristics and pedagogical practices. The anonymisation often "aims at—preventing the identification of the persons involved in the data and protecting them against

problems they could face because of what they said” or shared with the researcher (Mondada, 2014, p. 181).

Fourth, Wiles et al. (2008) distinguish two types of disclosure. One is deliberate disclosure. This often takes place when a researcher is obliged to disclose information, perhaps because information is revealed that identifies vulnerable or at-risk participants or family members, or, perhaps, for legal reasons. Another is accidental disclosure. This may arise from situations or incidents where a researcher accidentally breaks the confidentiality of participants. Nevertheless, they further explain that researchers need to discuss issues that may arise such as emotionally challenging issues, feelings of discomfort, difficulties, or simply emerging issues. Wiles et al. (2008) also advise that researchers ought to be mindful of not breaking confidentiality or anonymity accidentally, such as ‘letting something slip’ in conversation.

In the context of this research, the researcher had to make ethical decisions on several issues encountered during the data collection process, in which she had to be extremely careful with confidentiality issues. Since the researcher had shared a collegial and professional relationship prior to her study, participants openly discussed many personal matters not necessarily related to the research focus. Many of those conversations resulted from stress, feelings of helplessness, workload, and issues relating to the authorities at the workplace. The researcher, however, had to ensure that these conversations were confidential. In some interviews, participants discussed their own personal matters, and some even responded to personal phone calls involving personal conversations. These took place during the interviews, and in these instances, the researcher needed to pause the recording. None of these unrelated matters or issues were transcribed when data were documented. This is part of a researcher’s obligation to protect participants and keep what they share confidential. Duncan, Hall, and Knowles (2015) argue that confidentiality

often involves multiple and conflicting risks regarding both immediate and future harm. The researcher took this matter seriously, ensuring that she did not disclose any participant’s identity or reveal any matters that could potentially harm them. This was even the case when important findings were discussed during the analysis and thesis development with her supervisors or when she participated in any research conversation forum.

6. CONCLUSION

Garcia and Rose (2007) claim that teacher educators have dual responsibilities in their pedagogical roles. One is to teach pedagogical content, and the other is to model the best pedagogical practices. Similarly, Goodwin et al. (2014) argue that this duality is also represented in “doing and knowing” about pedagogy (p. 286). In addition, Williams (2014) suggests that teacher education requires teacher educators to shift professional identities between the two roles of teacher and teacher educator as required. Loughran (2014) argues that teacher educators must continually remember to make their practices explicit to their learners as part of modelling and developing pedagogical understanding. Such a position suggests that teacher educators must acquire a highly attuned self-knowledge about sound practices and can explain their reasoning in terms their learners can ‘get’. In turn, the expectation is that their learners can use that new knowledge in their own classroom practices. The researcher highlights teacher educators’ professional responsibilities as academics who follow the best practice and demonstrate ways of enhancing the pedagogical knowledge of novices.

As noted earlier, the teacher educator participants resisted the interpretations generated about their common practices when using digital technologies in their classrooms. The teacher educator participants were given opportunities to discuss the habitus and explore ideas about its formation; however, this was difficult because they

found it confronting to see that their practices were not necessarily what they had thought they were modelling. In the end, the researcher had positioned herself as a participant, rather than a researcher in developing the strategies to protect her participants. The researcher tried to put herself in their shoes to better understand the effect of the findings on their sense of self as teacher educators. As a result, the researcher needed to think beyond the research itself to possibly long-term consequences if their identities were revealed, and others could assign profiles and practices to individual colleagues.

In retrospect, perhaps what was also at the back of the researcher's mind, was what might happen if the worst-case scenario occurred and she had returned to the institution to work again, being a teacher educator herself. The researcher wondered if self-interest might also have been a driver in her wish to respect what her participants revealed to her and protect them from potential harm. What might this do to her reputation -- as a researcher and as a teacher educator? In the end, the researcher's experience of managing the ethical issues involved in protecting her research participants was worth revealing as it has potential to add to what is known about the practicalities of applying codes of ethics in small community contexts. Based on discussions several recommendations can be drawn.

Recommendations for Ethical Considerations in Small Communities Research

- **Prioritize Relational Ethics and Trust-Building:** Researchers should focus on building and maintaining trust with participants in small communities. This involves engaging in continuous dialogue, being transparent about research aims, and ensuring that participants understand the potential impacts of the research. Developing long-term relationships and showing genuine care and respect for community members can help in creating a more ethically sound research environment.
- **Enhance Informed Consent Processes:** In small communities, researchers should ensure that informed consent is not a one-time formality but an ongoing process. Consent should be continuously negotiated, with participants given ample opportunity to ask questions and withdraw if they feel uncomfortable. It is essential to use culturally appropriate language and methods that ensure participants fully understand their rights and the scope of the research.
- **Implement Robust Confidentiality and Anonymity Measures:** Due to the close-knit nature of small communities, there is a heightened risk of breaching confidentiality. Researchers should use pseudonyms, aggregate data, and carefully consider how much detail to provide in publications to avoid inadvertently revealing participants' identities. Data should be stored securely, and access should be limited to essential personnel only.
- **Engage in Reflexive Practice:** Researchers must continually reflect on their positionality, power dynamics, and potential biases that could affect the research process. This involves being aware of how their presence and actions may influence the community and the data collected. Regular reflexive journaling, peer debriefing, and community feedback sessions can help researchers remain ethically grounded.
- **Develop Context-Specific Ethical Guidelines:** Generic ethical guidelines may not fully capture the nuances of conducting research in small communities. Researchers should work with community members and ethics boards to develop context-specific ethical protocols that consider local norms, values, and social structures. This can help in ensuring that the research is conducted in a way that respects the community's unique context.
- **Ensure Transparent Reporting and Dissemination:** Researchers should be mindful of how they report and disseminate their findings. It is important to share results with the community in accessible formats and languages. Additionally, researchers should avoid sensationalizing findings and be careful not to publish information that could harm the community's reputation or well-being.

- **Prepare for Post-Research Implications:** Ethical considerations should extend beyond the data collection phase. Researchers should anticipate potential long-term implications for the community and individual participants. They should provide follow-up support, be available to discuss the findings, and help mitigate any negative consequences that arise from the research.
- **Impact of Ethical Breaches on Small Communities:** Investigating the impact of ethical breaches in research on the social fabric, trust, and collective well-being of small communities can provide insights into the consequences of ethical lapses. Research could focus on documenting real-life case studies and developing strategies to mitigate the adverse effects of such breaches.

Future Research Directions

Based on the findings of this research, a few future research directions can be outlined as given below.

- **Exploring Culturally Sensitive Ethical Frameworks:** Future research should focus on developing and testing culturally sensitive ethical frameworks tailored specifically to small communities. These frameworks should address the unique socio-cultural dynamics, power relationships, and ethical dilemmas encountered in small-scale settings. Comparative studies across different cultural contexts can help identify best practices and adaptable guidelines.
- **Impact of Digital Data Collection on Confidentiality and Anonymity:** With the increasing use of digital tools for data collection, future research should examine the implications of digital data collection methods (such as online surveys, social media analysis, and mobile apps) on confidentiality and anonymity in small communities. This research should focus on understanding the potential risks, ethical concerns, and strategies to safeguard participant data in digitally mediated research environments.
- **Researcher Reflexivity and Positionality in Small Communities:** Future studies should delve deeper into the role of researcher reflexivity and positionality when working in small communities. This involves critically examining how researchers' identities, backgrounds, and relationships with the community affect data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Research could explore effective reflexive practices that can enhance ethical rigor.

- **Developing Ethical Guidelines for Post-Research Engagement:** Future research could explore how researchers can ethically engage with small communities after the completion of a study. This could include developing guidelines for returning results to the community, managing expectations, and maintaining long-term relationships, especially when research findings have significant implications for the community's development or well-being.

These future research directions can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of ethical considerations in small community research, promoting more culturally sensitive, contextually relevant, and ethically sound practices.

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