

Reflexive adaptations in the field: navigating on-the-ground realities in field research

Abstract

Fieldwork in health research often reveals complex realities that challenge the assumptions outlined in the study protocol. Whilst adhering to pre-determined guidelines, researchers must practice reflexivity and adapt to emerging challenges – particularly in cross-cultural settings. This presentation reflects on practical challenges and complex realities encountered during fieldwork exploring the experiences and relationships of Community Health Volunteers in a non-government tuberculosis (TB) project in Zambia. During a 3-month period of fieldwork, in-depth interviews were undertaken with over 70 diverse TB project stakeholders from the community and health system in four public health facilities and their catchment areas. Supplemental data comprised observations, journaling, and TB project reports. Continuous reflexivity was used to guide adaptive decision-making in response to emerging challenges in the field. Methodological adaptations were made in response to real-world challenges. These included adapting consent procedures to prioritise participant understanding over formality, adjusting recruitment strategies to ensure broad representation, and refining interview guides to better elicit responses. Language use and transcription processes were negotiated with local researchers, balancing representation with cultural sensitivity. Power dynamics and insider-outsider positionality required reflexivity where participants expressed contradictory narratives or showed hesitancy linked to trust, stigma, or spiritual beliefs. Methodological adaptations reflect the importance of responsive, context-sensitive research practice. As living frameworks, ethics protocols guide principled action in complex environments. Reflexivity, flexibility, and respect for local ways of working are necessary to achieve ethical and analytical quality of field research, particularly in cross-cultural contexts involving diverse actors and layered power relationships.