

Interviewing children in disaster situations

A European journalist works for an NGO which provides healthcare services in disaster settings. The journalist goes to rural Swaziland to do a report on HIV/AIDS that is vastly underreported and devastating to the country. It is estimated that over 26 % of the population is infected and as a result of the effects of excess mortality due to AIDS, residents of Swaziland have one of the lowest documented life expectancy in the world at 50.5 years. The parent generation is the hardest hit and as a result many children are orphaned and left with their (often ill and weak) grandparents or alone. The country and the problem need to be put on European Countries' agendas in order to justify aid money and help to Swaziland. In order to have the story broadcasted and have it resonate with the media audience feelings need to be conveyed.

Using the services of a native translator the journalist interviews a little orphaned girl, whose parents have died of AIDS. She visits the girl in her hut in the countryside where she lives with her grandmother who is ill and cannot walk. The journalist asks the girl what she misses the most about her mother, how she feels about being orphaned etc, conducting the interview in a respectful manner but leaving the girl sad, upset and significantly distressed.

The girl's story is broadcasted in European countries reaching a wide audience and changing the political agenda. As a result, half a year later some projects are initiated to help Swaziland combat the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The journalist has anonymized the girl to protect her identity and it is therefore unknown whether or not she will directly benefit from the new projects.

Questions:

- 1) Is (informed) consent presumed in this case? How important is the child's age? Does it matter if the interview subject is of an age in Swaziland that is considered to be an adult, or on the cusp of adulthood? Can the grandmother withhold consent on the child's behalf?
- 2) Is it justifiable for the journalist to leave the girl in significant distress to get a good and relatable story out? Is it a necessary evil to make the girl sad and significantly distressed in order to enhance the story? Is it justifiable if she directly benefits? Does it matter if she might not benefit but others do?
- 3) Does it make a difference whether the journalist interviews the child because she wants to help the HIV-infected population of Swaziland or because she wants to further her own career for fame and money? Does motivation/intention of the journalist matter if the end result is the same, i.e. additional aid money being raised for Swaziland?
- 4) How could you take measures to make the situation a little bit less difficult/terrifying/traumatizing for the child?
- 5) After the interview the journalist gives the child a bag of groceries and sweets. It was not agreed upon beforehand and the journalist does it because she feels a strong urge to help the child just a bit. Does that compromise the neutrality and objectivity of the story? The bag of

groceries will probably last a couple of weeks. Is the journalist only doing this to make herself feel better?

- 6) What if cash payment was offered to the child/her grandmother? Does it make any difference if the cash sum is considered to be small or large?
- 7) Could it ever be justifiable to use a negative inducement in order to obtain the same result?
- 8) When a child is orphaned, hungry and possibly infected with HIV can you cause harm with an interview or is it a westernized perception?
- 9) Does using a native translator create issues around confidentiality and miscommunication, with corresponding potential harms to the public and public authorities if they are misinformed and manipulated by the interview?

Learning outcomes:

- 1) Reflection on whether there was harm caused to the child and if it balances with the good of the many.
- 2) Reflection on the importance of the motives of the journalist (child as a means (only means?) to and end)
- 3) Reflection on how to interact with the local population.