

NO 3

July 2023

# Participant voice first: Busara's research agenda on ethical research in the Global South

RESEARCH  
AGENDA

**Key words:**

ethics

participation

behavioral science

Global South

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**Conflicts of interest:**

There are no conflicts of interest to declare for this study.

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### **Acknowledgement and non-author contributions**

We are indebted to all our participants. We are grateful to Johannes Haushofer, James Vancel, Channing Jang, David Clarence, Jennifer Adhiambo, Irene Ngina and many more for their preceding work on setting Busara's internal research agendas. Special thanks are reserved for Anisha Singh, who guided and reviewed this work through several versions.



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### Abbreviations and acronyms

IRB	Institutional Review Board
RCT	Randomized Controlled Trial

# Executive summary

The use of experiments in social science has brought huge gains in our knowledge of the world. However, in recent debates, sharp criticisms of the power imbalances of the discipline have been made. There have been some responses on how we can improve our approach to be more ethical. These responses have often conceived of research ethics rather narrowly, and not included wider responsibilities beyond the protection of participants. Often missing from both sides has been empirical study of the preferences of those research participants, and the societies they belong to.

As part of our commitment to racial, gender and wider social justice, commitment to advancing the voices of research participants, and under the banner of our values of respect and purpose, Busara proposes to organize and formalize its agenda on research ethics by combining past learnings with new studies to deeply understand the experiences of research participants, and by finding better ways of closing the loop in communication with those participants.

From there, we will co-create, test and disseminate changes to research processes and practices that improve participant welfare and uphold ever-higher standards of ethical practice. We believe that this is both more just, as well as likely to produce better quality research.



# Introduction: The global debate on experiments and ethics

Experiments in the social sciences have taught us an enormous amount in recent decades (Falk & Heckman, 2009; Duflo & Banerjee, 2013). Yet there has also been considerable criticism of a perceived dominance of experimentation in the study of development, which critics hold represents and deepens fundamental power imbalances in the production of knowledge (Amarante et al, 2021). A special issue of *World Development* (Volume 127, March 2020) reviewed many of the problems, with important critiques made by Hoffman and Kaplan et al in particular.

A further set of strongly worded criticisms was published by the *CODESRIA Bulletin*, featuring contributions from several African researchers, as well as Hoffman once again. These criticisms go further than the methodological cases that have long been made by Deaton (e.g. Deaton & Cartwright, 2018) and Pritchett (2018). Those older criticisms, though sometimes made in ethical terms, were mostly focused on misallocation of resources and the problems of causal inference.

More recent criticisms have centered on the power imbalances present in much research. They argue that these imbalances mean that when research is conducted in the Global South, it replicates and perpetuates colonial relationships. They note that almost all the money, theory and hypotheses

for this research comes from the West, and that as a result, the knowledge produced serves Western academic career advancement more than actual development policy. The recommendations and findings generated by this work, they argue, are insufficiently grounded in the realities and experiences of those in the Global South, and so have only limited validity and value to the people and places they ostensibly seek to serve.

When research is done poorly, it can harm many people - including 'field' research staff (Steinert et al, 2021). As Hoffman (2020) makes clear, if a research project cannot be conducted ethically, with accountability structures to ensure that it is, then it should not go ahead. More than that, we are optimistic that good ethical practice enhances the quality of data collected too (Crow et al, 2007), because when research is genuinely inclusive, it better represents the voices and worlds of those we seek to study (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995).

## Moving beyond research ethics

The scope of these debates about how to conduct research ethically go well beyond those usually encompassed by the term 'research ethics' (Herington & Tanona, 2020). We need to move beyond a narrow focus only on the welfare of individual participants (Camfield & Palmer-Jones, 2015)—though of course that remains crucial, too—and examine our role in a wider ecosystem of international development knowledge, especially when our research findings are likely to have an impact on policy and programs (Barnett & Camfield, 2016; Scott, 2016).



A number of researchers, whose work has been founded on experimentation in the Global South, have responded to these criticisms of randomized controlled trials (RCTs) with suggestions for more ethical conduct in experimentation (Humphreys, 2020). Several of these have highlighted the close relationship between ethical practice and data quality.

The most recent of these, reviewing several previous articles, is that by Evans (2021). Evans aggregates nine practical suggestions for planning, conducting and writing up RCTs. Other important contributions have been made by Asiedu et al (2021), Cronin-Furman & Lake (2018), Groves Williams (2016), as well as a book chapter by Glennerster and Powers (2016).

Glennerster and Powers highlight how the US Belmont Principles of ethical research apply to the particular challenges of experimental research in the Global South. Asiedu et al seek to ensure we are paying attention to these concerns with a call for more comprehensive reporting of ethical considerations in paper appendices. Groves Williams (2016) charts the many inconsistencies in the way we presently approach this problem. Only Cronin-Furman & Lake move beyond the standard Belmont Principles to examine what research for equity would look like (specifically in relation to conflict research, but their recommendations have wider applicability for research in the Global South). They detail the many ethical risks that arise when there are power imbalances between researchers and other participants, and offer a checklist of ways to protect research subjects, partners and assistants. Naturally these papers build on much older ethical debates that have run



throughout the history of social science, often building on work done in the medical sciences (Resnik, 2020)<sup>1</sup>.

We believe that ethical experimental research can mean something more. In Busara's view, missing so far from these debates is the voice of those who participate in this research. What does 'ethical research' mean to them? Of the many ideas for more ethical research, which would they value? What harms do they themselves perceive? How do they think about and prioritize privacy, confidentiality, vulnerability and related ideas? Are the options suggested by various Western scholars well-aligned with the interests of those they seek to protect, as they themselves see them? How do they think about the constructs and principles that underlie ethics, such as dignity and respect (Wein, 2020)? How does all this vary among different places and different social groups? Do our participants believe that we are drawing accurate conclusions based on high-quality data, or do they have doubts?

We propose to adopt participatory research methods, in order to draw on the voices of those who participate in research to prioritize among the various ameliorative options. Their preferences may often differ in surprising ways from our own (Redfern et al, 2019). This would begin to generate a preference-driven empirical basis for our ethics-focused practices, centered on those who participate in social science research in the Global South.

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1 An exceptionally useful bibliography has been prepared by MacKay (Cohn & MacKay, n.d.): <https://dmackay.web.unc.edu/ethics-of-field-experiments-a-bibliography/>



These practices would then apply to all types of research and evaluation projects, whatever methodological approach they employ.

## Research is changing

These critiques come at a time when many institutions, including in the worlds of research and international development, are wrestling with urgent ethical failures around race (Ampofo, 2016; Pailey, 2020) and gender (Brown (ed.), 2019; Goncharenko, 2021). Any new articulation of principles of research ethics must also respond to that wider ethical challenge, and seek to create relationships of justice, not merely beneficence (Barnett & Camfield, 2016).

Even research itself is changing. As we strive to be more ethical, we must do so in ways that reflect the changing situation when it comes to the methods we employ. In particular, remote research through digital means was already becoming more common before 2020, and the dislocations brought by the pandemic have greatly accelerated that trend (Richardson et al, 2021; Hensen et al, 2021).

# Busara's contribution

Our proposed body of research will contribute to the debate between critics of experimentation and those who have offered responses. At the heart of this work will be empirical research into the preferences of those with the least power and voice in the system - the research participants themselves, with whom we will work in partnership (Arnstein, 1969). We will work to close feedback loops, strengthening the voice of those participants. Throughout our research we will adopt the lens of racial, gender and wider social justice, going beyond the typical narrowly conceived concerns of research ethics as they are usually represented in approval processes by Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) (O'Flynn et al, 2016).

This research agenda will seek to develop our collective understanding of the experiences and understandings of people who participate in research, starting with those in our longest-standing areas of work around Nairobi, Kenya, and expanding to other geographies such as India and Nigeria over time.

We will examine what topics research should focus more on, how we can ensure participants properly reflect and represent the lives of the people we study, and how those participants can be better engaged in our studies. We will track barriers to involvement, comprehension and welfare of our participants, looking at respect, enjoyment and engagement across projects, and especially for women and groups that face racial or other oppressed



identities. We will invite participants across multiple segments of the population, including those with a low socio-economic status and those who are marginalized for other reasons, to share their recommendations of what should be studied in development research and behavioral science, and how it should be done. Throughout we will privilege co-creation and participatory approaches to research (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995), digging in to understand the constructs that underlie ethical principles. We will look both at methods and processes, and also at the research questions in which these are most interested.

We will have a special focus on how this can be done through the constraints of remote research, for example through pre-testing of studies, soliciting open-ended feedback from participants, soliciting such feedback from staff, conducting more focused quantitative and qualitative inquiries, experimentally varying changes to ethical procedures, and valuing other learning opportunities.

Drawing on all this, we will develop new approaches to our research, including revised research protocols, forms of participant engagement, and different types of feedback and dissemination—approaches that have the best chance of both improving the respectfulness of our research and of increasing data quality. We will test the impact of these new approaches on participant experiences and other research outcomes, ensuring that they work well both on average and to improve the participation and experiences of minoritized population segments.

Based on all this, Busara will develop a set of recommended changes for study protocols and internal ethical approvals, that have been proven to improve participant welfare and uphold ever-higher standards of ethical practice. Where the data supports this, these will be standardized protocols that can work well across multiple communities. We will work to ensure that these are practical approaches that take account of the many pressures faced by researchers that make it harder to practice ethical research (Scott, 2016). Wherever possible, we will suggest improvements that can be incorporated into remote research methods. This we will disseminate to the wider development research community, and report on in our pre-analysis plans, papers and reports in line with the recommendations of Asiedu et al (2021).

We should note what this agenda will not do. This is not an adjudication of the value of experimental research; Busara believes in the unique power of experimentation for precisely answering many urgent research questions. It is also not an attempt to devise a wholly novel ethical framework, or to return to the philosophical foundations of research ethics. These are important areas of research, but they are not areas where Busara can make a particularly unique contribution. Our focus will instead be on practical, ameliorative improvements to research ethics, derived from and tested together with participants who experience research like Busara's.



# Core questions

In implementing this research agenda, we will comprehensively answer the following core questions by seeking to conduct multiple studies using qualitative, quantitative, design and experimental approaches to address each one:

- 1. What are the experiences, understandings and preferences of our research participants, including those who are most likely to be excluded from such conversations, when it comes to the respectfulness of our research?***
- 2. How can we improve the experiences of research participants, including those who are most likely to be excluded from such conversations, better align with their understandings and incorporate their preferences into our research agenda in ways that make it more respectful of their dignity?***
- 3. What combination of protocols, measures, systems and practices, including IRB processes, will ensure that we maintain those improvements across all of Busara's projects, including those employing remote research methods, and allow other research implementers to do the same?***
- 4. What is the relationship between ethical practice and data quality?***

**5. How do the answers to these questions vary across gender, racial, national and economic groups?**

The following figure depicts how these core questions developed from linking the global debate with our contribution.



**Global debate:**

The conversation on research ethics and RCTs has received many contributions, but few if any feature the voices of research participants.

**Our contribution:**

We will understand participant preferences and develop protocols that align with what they want from us.

**Core research questions**

What are the experiences of our research participants? How can we improve them? How can we standardise this into best practice? How does it vary across groups?

**Research approach**

Mixed methods, beginning with lots of careful qualitative work and careful co-creation.

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**Figure 1:** How the global debate and our contribution shaped the core research questions and approaches



# Research approach

In addressing these core questions, we will place a special emphasis on participatory and qualitative research methods to ensure we are gaining a deep understanding of the many and varied experiences of different groups of research participants. Drawing on our deeper understanding, we will seek to co-create interventions and improvements with those participants. Only once we have developed high confidence that our ideas are founded in the complex lived experiences of our participants will we move towards quantitative research and experimental testing in order to verify which interventions have the greatest impact. Throughout our research, we will take care to include those who are otherwise less likely to have a chance to raise their voices, including women, those from racial and ethnic minorities (in ways that are attuned to the specific local experiences of those in Kenya and other countries of study), those from lower socio-economic statuses, and other groups that face oppression and marginalization. In doing so, we will also try to be aware of who volunteers to participate in studies of research ethics, and deliberately seek out the views of those who may be underrepresented.

Initially therefore, to address core question one, you can expect from Busara qualitative and photovoice investigations of our participants' experiences. We will gather and share deeper participatory work on shared definitions of major research principles. You can expect qualitative, and later experimental, examinations of the value of feedback to participants, as well as their ranking of various suggested improvements to ethical research practice, as first answers to question two. And a whole lot more beyond that.



# Conclusion

Busara aims to advance and apply behavioral science in pursuit of poverty alleviation. Unethical research cannot yield the high quality data needed to achieve the alleviation of poverty—nor can it possibly be classed as good science. If a study cannot be done ethically, it should not go ahead. We cannot hope to pursue the uncertain pathway of doing good in the world through the means of research, if at the first hurdle we do harm.

Yet these widely-shared beliefs are much harder to put into practice than we might believe. Ethical practice easily lapses into a box-ticking exercise. Many of the ways researchers protect participants have little regard to the actual preferences of those participants, and are instead governed by far-off IRBs, following principles focused on and articulated by those in the Global North. When it comes to the specific debates about experimental research, neither the ethical criticisms nor the responses to them feature the voices of the participants themselves.

We believe that ethical research can mean something different. We believe that research is ethical when it is done through a close and enduring partnership with the people who it seeks to serve. When researchers see the full dignity of those they interview, we might begin to get somewhere. It is this moral purpose that we hope this research agenda can serve, hand in hand with the moral urgency to produce high quality research in addressing issues of poverty. We hope that this will bring about a more just research ecosystem, better evidence, and wiser policies grounded in the evidence this yields, for everyone's benefit.

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## About Busara

Busara is a research and advisory organization, working with researchers and organizations to advance and apply behavioral science in pursuit of poverty alleviation. Busara pursues a future where global human development activities respond to people's lived experience; value knowledge generated in the context it is applied; and promote culturally appropriate and inclusive practices. To accomplish this, we practice and promote behavioral science in ways that center and value the perspectives of respondents; expand the practice of research where it is applied; and build networks, processes, and tools that increase the competence of practitioners and researchers.

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## About Busara Groundwork

Busara Groundwork lays the groundwork for future research and program design. As think pieces, they examine the current state of knowledge and what is needed to advance it, frame important issues with a behavioral perspective, or put forward background information on a specific context.

## How to cite:

Wambua, Joel; Nicholas Owsley; Tom Wein. *Participant voice first: Busara's research agenda on ethical research in the Global South*. Busara Groundwork No. 3 (Research Agenda). Nairobi: Busara, 2023. DOI: [doi.org/10.62372/NQPF8886](https://doi.org/10.62372/NQPF8886)

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