

Engaging in **Culturally**-**Responsive** International Research

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Kayla M. Johnson, PhD

Associate Professor
University of Kentucky
kayla.johnson@uky.edu

Meseret Hailu, PhD

Assistant Professor
University of Georgia
meseret.hailu@uga.edu

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Designing and Implementing Your Own Culturally-Responsive Study

The following questions are for your consideration as you design and/or implement your own culturally-responsive research studies in international contexts.

Design Considerations

Positionality & Assumptions

- Who are you in relation to the community or issue you intend to study? What power do you carry into this research context?
- What assumptions are you bringing about what counts as valid knowledge, rigorous methodology, or meaningful findings?
- How has your own cultural, educational, and professional formation shaped the questions you are asking? The questions you are not asking?
- Whose framework(s) are you using to define the problem? Is that framework appropriate for this context?

Research Questions & Purpose

- Who identified this research problem—you, or the community? If you did, how do you know it matters to them?
- Who benefits from this research, and in what ways? Who might be harmed or marginalized by it?
- Are your research questions open enough to allow the community's own priorities and ways of knowing to surface?
- Would the people you are studying recognize themselves and their experiences in the way you have framed your inquiry?

Methodology & Design

- Is the methodology you have chosen appropriate for this cultural context?
- Have you consulted with community members, local scholars, or other cultural insiders in designing your study?
- What local knowledge traditions, ways of storytelling, or meaning-making practices might inform or enrich your methodological choices?
- How will you handle translation—not just linguistically, but conceptually? Are there ideas or experiences in this context that resist direct translation?

Partnership & Ethics

- Do you have genuine relationships with this community, or are you entering as a stranger with their own research agenda?
- How are local researchers, community members, or cultural liaisons involved in the design of the study—not just as gatekeepers or data sources, but as collaborators?
- What reciprocal obligations are you taking on by entering this community? What will you give back?
- How will you handle findings that are sensitive, potentially harmful, or that the community may not want shared publicly?
- What does informed consent look like in this community? Does your consent process reflect local norms and values, or does it simply satisfy your institution's requirements?
- What other ethical review processes exist locally, and have you engaged with them in addition to your home institution's IRB?

Implementation Considerations

Entering the Field

- How are you introducing yourself and your research to community members? What are you emphasizing, and what might you be leaving out?
- How are you building trust, and how much time are you allowing for that process before beginning data collection?
- Are you paying attention to what is (not) being said, what spaces or people you are (not) being given access to, and what that might mean?
- How are you showing up as a person, not just as a researcher? Are you investing in relationships beyond the boundaries of your data collection?

Data Collection

- Are your data collection instruments—such as interview protocols, observation checklists, and surveys—culturally appropriate? Have they been reviewed by someone with deep knowledge of this context?
- How are participants experiencing the data collection process? Are there any signs of discomfort?
- Are you collecting data in ways that feel extractive, or in ways that feel like genuine exchange?
- How are you navigating language in data collection and more informal interactions? What is being lost or distorted in translation, and how are you accounting for that?
- How are you documenting your own reactions, assumptions, and emotional responses in the field?

Relationships & Power

- How are power dynamics showing up in your data collection interactions? Are participants able to decline, redirect, or push back?
- Are there community members who are being centered in your data collection and others who are being left out? Why?
- How are you compensating participants, and is that compensation appropriate and fair by local standards?
- Are local research assistants or collaborators being credited, compensated, and treated as genuine partners?

Reflexivity in the Field

- When do you notice your assumptions surfacing? What do you do with that discomfort?
- How are you checking your interpretations with community members?
- Are there moments when the community's reality is challenging your theoretical framework? How are you sitting with that tension?
- What are you learning about yourself as a researcher and as a person in this process?

Unexpected Challenges

- How are you responding when things do not go as planned, such as when access is denied, when participants redirect you, or when your methodology doesn't fit the context as well as you expected?
- How are you making decisions in the field when ethical dilemmas arise that your IRB approval did not anticipate?
- Who are you consulting when you are uncertain, and are those people truly positioned to help you navigate this context?

Potential Funding Sources

First, sign up for [Pivot-RP](#) from ProQuest.

Internal Funding

Many larger-scale international research projects begin with small amounts of “seed” funding from researchers’ own institutions.

External Funding

Depending on your research focus, geographic location, and other contextual considerations, additional prospective funders may include:

- Spencer Foundation
- Fulbright Program
- Lumina Foundation
- William T. Grant Foundation
- Russell Sage Foundation Pipeline Grants Competition
- Clare Boothe Luce Women in STEM Program, Henry Luce Foundation
- State Farm Good Neighbor Citizenship Company Grants
- Brady Education Foundation
- Ralph E. Powe Junior Faculty Enhancement Awards
- Nathan Cummings Foundation
- Abdulla Al Ghurair Foundation for Education
- Sheikh Saud bin Saqr Al Qasimi Foundation for Policy Research
- Dudley T. Dougherty Foundation Grant

Recommended Readings

On Cultural Responsivity in International Research Settings

- Ball, J., & Janyst, P. (2008). Enacting research ethics in partnerships with Indigenous communities in Canada: "Do it in a good way". *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics*, 3(2), 33-51.
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Examples from Our Research

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Hailu, M. F. (2019). Examining the role of Girl Effect in contributing to positive education ideologies for girls in Ethiopia. *Gender and Education*, 31(8), 986-999.

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Johnson, K. M., & Levitan, J. (2021). Exploring the identities and experiences of rural first-generation Indigenous students using photo-cued interviewing. *SAGE Research Methods Cases*, Part 1.

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Author Information

Kayla M. Johnson, PhD

Associate Professor, University of Kentucky

Email: kayla.johnson@uky.edu

Profile: <https://education.uky.edu/people/kayla-johnson>

Website: <https://education.uky.edu/johnson-lab>

Dr. Kayla Johnson is an associate professor in the Department of Educational Policy Studies and Evaluation at the University of Kentucky. She serves as Associate Director of the Office of Higher Education Research and as Director of the JOHNSon Lab (Journeys and Opportunities in Higher and iNternational education). Her most recent research projects have explored: 1) study abroad opportunities for first-generation college students, 2) postsecondary education for rural first-generation Indigenous students, and 3) the impact of Covid-19 on teaching and learning opportunities for Indigenous youth in the Peruvian Andes. In 2016, she co-founded Centro Educativo Pallata Ayllu (Pallata Community Education Center), a non-governmental, non-profit organization that facilitates access to culturally-grounded and community-driven educational opportunities for Indigenous children and adults in Peru. A first-generation college student from Appalachian Ohio and West Virginia, Dr. Johnson earned a dual-title PhD in Higher Education and Comparative & International Education from the Pennsylvania State University, an MS in Higher Education from the University of Kentucky, and BAs in English, French, and Secondary Education from Marshall University.

Meseret Hailu, PhD

Assistant Professor, University of Georgia

Email: meseret.hailu@uga.edu

Profile: <https://ihe.uga.edu/directory/people/meseret-hailu>

Website: <https://www.meserethailu.com/>

Dr. Meseret F. Hailu is an Assistant Professor of Higher Education at the Louise McBee Institute of Higher Education, University of Georgia (UGA). She studies how higher education helps people mobilize skills, credentials, and networks to enhance their quality of life? Geographically, she focuses her work in East Africa and the United States. Methodologically, Dr. Hailu approaches her work through mixed methods, specializing in qualitative research. Prior to coming to UGA, Dr. Hailu was a faculty member in the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University and a Postdoctoral Research Associate at The Ohio State University. She received her Ph.D. from the Morgridge College of Education at the University of Denver.