Because of temptations: children, sex and HIV/AIDS in Tanzania

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Citation for published version (APA):

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Dear teachers of xxx Primary School,

I have come to understand that you are concerned about my research activities with the primary school students of your school. I write you this letter in an attempt to explain to you clearly about the intentions, reasons and working methods of my research. I hope this will convince you that I am a legal researcher and have no intentions of harming anyone.

My background
I am a doctorate (PhD) student from the University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands. I have degrees in Medicine and Medical Anthropology. Medical Anthropology is the study of diseases and behavior related to health and illness in different cultures and ethnic groups.

My research
I am focusing on the problems of HIV/AIDS and how these problems affect the lives of children. Previous research indicated that children in Tanzania are confronted with temptations of getting involved in sexual relationships. This of course means that they might get exposed to HIV and thus forms a threat to their lives. With my research I want to find out how realistic this threat is. To be able to do that, I need to understand the motivations and reasons for children in the age of 8-16 to agree or refuse to get involved in sexual relationships.

My methods
Next to your school, I interview students at a primary school in xxxx (near Mwanza) and in xxxx (near Magu) as well as a group of children who are not going to school, in a village called xxxx at the lake shore (near Nyanguge). I have also interviewed a lot of street children in Mwanza town.
In September I started with group discussions, where I would ask the children questions regarding:
- Why boys and girl want to get involved / do not want to get involved
- Family background (religion, occupation of parents, strictness of upbringing, economics, constitution of household etc)
- How they reach agreements (what they say, what they give, dress codes etc)
- Where they learn these things
- What they expect from a partner
- etc

I use the video camera to record the discussions, so Godfrey and I can listen to it again and type it out word for word. I have now in total conducted more than 70 group or personal interviews and transcribed over 400 pages of interviews.

Next to group interviews, we ask children to write essays for us about above topics, make drawings, perform a play/drama, interview each other and at the moment I have reached the stage where I am interested in children’s personal stories and opinions. Let me assure you that the children I personally interview, are not selected because we think they have sexual relationships. Often it is even the opposite! We just want to find out about their norms and
values with regard to e.g. condom use, faithfulness, tasks and duties of wives and husbands etc.

Confidentiality
It is of the utmost importance that the children tell us the truth and do not lie when they answer our questions. To assure this,
- we only interview children who volunteer to participate in our research
- we do not pay money or bribe them with gifts (otherwise they will say anything just to get the money/gift. We do offer lunch if we use the person’s lunch time)
- we guarantee confidentiality, meaning that we will not reveal any sensitive information about them or the people they talk about
- we want to guarantee anonymity. So in the book that I am going to write, there will be no use of real names and nobody will ever know who said what.

It is therefore very important for us to have the support and trust of the teachers of the schools that we work with.

Supervision and Research Approval
My research has been officially approved by COSTECH, the Tanzanian government’s commission for science and technology (see attachment I) as well as by the District Educational Officers of Mwanza and Magu Districts (see attachments II & III). I am officially supervised by NIMR, the National Institute for Medical Research, under which TANESA (Tanzania Netherlands project to Support HIV/AIDS Control in Mwanza region) falls. Within TANESA, I work with the guardian program.

Goal of the research
To write a book that increases people’s understanding about the lives of children and the difficulties they have to deal with on a day-to-day basis, in particular with regard to making decisions concerning sexual issues. I hope by publishing this book and articles, policy makers (people working for n.g.o.’s) will make use of the knowledge I gained with your help and apply their programs in a way it will help to decrease the chances of the future generation to get infected with HIV.

Please, if you have any questions, never hesitate to ask me. I would like to invite you all to a group discussion where I can ask you about your opinion and you can ask me about anything that I did not make clear.

Thank you very much,
Kind regards,

Miranda van Reeuwijk and Godfrey Francis