

Ethical Issues Related to Positionality and Reverse Asymmetry in International Development Research: Experiences in Researching South Asian Philanthropy

Nirojan Kulendrarajah

Ethics and International Development Research
Éthique et recherche en développement international
Volume 1, Number 1, 2018

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1058316ar>
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1058316ar>

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Publisher(s)

Programmes de bioéthique, École de santé publique de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN
2561-4665 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Kulendrarajah, N. (2018). Ethical Issues Related to Positionality and Reverse Asymmetry in International Development Research: Experiences in Researching South Asian Philanthropy. *Canadian Journal of Bioethics / Revue canadienne de bioéthique*, 1(1), 43–45. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1058316ar>

Article abstract

The role of asymmetry and positionality of the researcher-research participant relationship is important for research ethics in international development. However, discourse should take into account instances where 'reverse asymmetry' may exist, and consider developing different strategies and concerns for researchers to consider in this context.



ÉTUDE DE CAS / CASE STUDY

Ethical Issues Related to Positionality and Reverse Asymmetry in International Development Research: Experiences in Researching South Asian Philanthropy

Nirojan Kulendrarajah¹**Résumé**

Le rôle de l'asymétrie et du positionnement dans la relation chercheur-participant à la recherche est important pour l'éthique de la recherche en développement international. Les situations où l'on identifie une « asymétrie inversée » doivent également être prises en compte par les organismes responsables et des stratégies devraient être élaborées afin de soutenir les chercheurs dans ce contexte.

Mots clés

Asie du Sud, positionnement, asymétrie inversée, développement international, institutions nationales d'éthique de la recherche

Abstract

The role of asymmetry and positionality of the researcher-research participant relationship is important for research ethics in international development. However, discourse should take into account instances where 'reverse asymmetry' may exist, and consider developing different strategies and concerns for researchers to consider in this context.

Keywords

South Asia, positionality, reverse asymmetry, international development, national research ethics institutions

Introduction

In field of international development research, there has been growing attention to the ethical issues that occur when researchers and research participants come from different cultural, national and socio-economic backgrounds – especially in the case where researchers from the Global North conduct research in the Global South. The researcher's respective background and privilege may inform their worldview, mindset and approach to research and knowledge and present issues for international development research in the Global South. In addition, the researcher's background and position of power can also privilege this worldview and knowledge at the expense of the research participant's worldview and mindset [1]. This may not only influence the research analysis and findings but also the considerations, weighting and assumptions related to issues of consent, justice and safety of the research participant. Most often, this asymmetrical relationship is characterized by a Northern researcher being in the position of power relative to their Southern participant [2]. However, this situation may obscure the diverse competing positions concerning the researcher and research participant's socio-economic class, gender, and nationality. The research participant may be even in a position of power and privilege relative to the Northern researcher, and not vice versa. This can create a condition of reverse asymmetry where the researcher is, due to the country and participant's socio-cultural context, the one with a lower relative positionality. This case study provides an example of how this situation can raise issues for international development research, and then provides observations and considerations for future researchers.

Case Presentation

This case study presents a year-long research project as part of Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC)'s Research Awards, which involved qualitative research in urban India. The research project was a qualitative study on the city's philanthropic sector and involved a small number of interviews with officials from this sector. Ethics approval for the research was obtained from the internal research ethics process at the IDRC. The research project examined the role that particular non-profit and non-governmental actors play in the city's philanthropic sector and required interviewing officials from these organizations about their roles with respect to the general Indian philanthropic sector, as well of their own organizations.

Unlike other non-profits, many – if not most – of the actors in these philanthropic organizations are from a high socio-economic background, educated abroad and often from the financial or technology sector in India and abroad. In addition, the organizations' clients were often extremely wealthy and well-known figures from the country's business, technology, and entertainment sectors. While being a researcher from a well-known development organization in the Global North had its benefits and provided privileges such as increased institutional support, credibility and social networks¹, it was clear that the asymmetry traditionally discussed in ethical issues surrounding Northern researchers in the Global South was not present here. The positionalities of my research participants were different than the general concept of research participants in India. While their ethnic and geographic backgrounds were similar to other Indian research participants in international development research, they were in high socio-economic positions. This socio-economic position was the main and most salient aspect in my interactions with them. In addition to easing the navigation of ethical issues that are more pronounced in the traditional

¹ That being said, no one except my initial contact in the sector had heard of the IDRC and one organization's staff thought I was an external auditor.

Correspondance / Correspondence: Nirojan Kulendrarajah, nirokule@gmail.com

ISSN 2561-4665



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Northern-Southern research participant relationship, their high socioeconomic background also provided benefits in the research process as it contributed to a more relaxed and collegial atmosphere during interviews and discussions. At times, this reverse asymmetry provided different obstacles to accessing, meeting or securing interviews with some more senior officials in these organizations, which could have provided more informative discussions on the subject matter. While this is an issue of participant recruitment, it points to emerging challenges for researchers in international development as a result of changing positionalities and asymmetries.

Observations

Because the project was social scientific research, it was not required to obtain research ethics approval at the national level in India. At the same time, IDRC's research ethics process did not discuss or track any issues related to reverse asymmetry. The research ethics process did ensure that researchers were equipped to deal with issues of consent, vulnerability of research participants and appropriate protocol in data collection and storage, all of which are vital and urgent requirements to conduct research in the Global South. However, as a Northern Institution, the IDRC research ethics process may not recognize context-specific local ethical issues emerging from fieldwork, such as reverse asymmetry. In this case, a local research ethics board (REB) in India may be better aware of the local and issue-specific risks and challenges to conducting research. While the reverse asymmetry that I faced did not threaten the research or researcher, it is clear that a REB in the Global North may be risking researchers in international development in cases where this reverse asymmetry does more than inconvenience the researcher and can possibly put the researcher in harm's way.² Aside from personal harms to researchers, this reverse asymmetry can affect the research process itself and thus the results and data in countries without local REBs. Research participants, particularly senior organization officials, may use this asymmetry to influence research findings or undermine the confidentiality of other participants. Even though the mandate of a REB is primarily to protect research participants, the risk to researchers or research in contexts where reverse asymmetry can pose issues may provide reflection on the appropriate role of REBs.

In many countries in the Global South, not all research participants will be the stereotypical vulnerable research participants commonly assumed in international development research. There will also be transnational elites from the country's highest socioeconomic groups who hold power and privilege in a local or global context. Likewise, these situations of reverse asymmetry could also include research involving government officials or policy-makers, expatriates, and security sector/military personnel. In countries where ethics review for social science research is required, it may be that local REBs can provide more local and up-to-date information for Northern researchers in international development, as they may be more aware of the complex and intersectional identities and groups in their own country. For India, however, foreign researchers should perform an exhaustive personal evaluation of the field to ensure that any likelihood of reverse asymmetry and its implications for the researcher and the participants is understood and mitigated.

Questions to Consider

1. In what ways does the Global North's history of international development work and research assume that researchers will always be in an implicit position of power in the researcher-participant relationship? What means might be implemented to change this assumption?
2. Given that both researchers and research participants will have multiple competing positionalities, they might be in the position of power in an asymmetrical relationship. Is it possible for REBs to weight different positionalities as more important than others? What are some possible strategies to do that?
3. Given that the mandate of a REB is to ensure the protection and welfare of research participants, what is the appropriate and ethical role for a REB in situations where researchers may find themselves in a reverse asymmetrical relationship?

² Some of the risks to safety that researchers, especially female researchers, may face in these contexts are illustrated by the testimonial from Mingwei Huang and her experiences [3].

Remerciements

L'auteur souhaite remercier les éditeurs du numéro spécial pour avoir organisé ce numéro et pour leurs commentaires judicieux. De même, l'auteur remercie le CRDI pour le financement, le soutien, ainsi que le mentorat apporté au cours du présent projet de recherche. Les opinions exprimées dans cet ouvrage sont celles de l'auteur et ne représentent pas nécessairement celles du CRDI ou de son conseil d'administration.

Conflit d'intérêts

Aucun déclaré

Éditeurs/Editors: Patrick Angès Gogognon

Affiliations des auteurs / Author Affiliations

¹ Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, Canada

Reçu/Received: 29 Nov 2016 **Publié/Published:** 15 Feb 2018

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank the editors of the guest volume for organizing the special issue and their helpful feedback. Likewise, the author also thanks IDRC for the funding, support and mentorship provided during the research project referenced here. The views expressed in this work are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of IDRC or its Board of Governors.

Conflicts of Interest

None to declare

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