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Moving Out of the Backstage: How Can We Decolonize Research?

OCTOBER 22, 2019OCTOBER 23, 2019 / GUEST AUTHORS

This blogpost is written by seventeen researchers based in (or in between) various settings, in particular the DR Congo, Sierra Leone, India, Sweden, Rwanda and the UK. Since all co-authors do not have a personal or institutional web-sites they are simply listed by name, in alphabetical order: Oscar Adedi Dunia; Stanislas Bisimwa , Elisée Cirhuza, Maria Eriksson Baaz, John Ferekani, Pascal Imili, Evariste Kambale, Jérémie Mapatano; Lebon Mulimbi; Bienvenu Mukungilwa; Lievin Mukingj; David Mwambari; Swati Parashar; Darwin Rukanyaga Assumani; Wolf Sinzaher, Mats Utas and James Vincent.

Research here in the DRC is like the coltan and other minerals. Other countries that don't have access to it claim it and benefit from it. It is the same with research. The research would not be possible without us. Still it is people from the outside who profit from it, get visibility, funding and are called experts. At the same time we – the ones who provide access, adapt the methodology and questions and collect the data in very precarious circumstances – get little compensation and are not acknowledged. It is sort of a continuation of colonial relations.

This was one of the conclusions summarising a workshop organised to exchange experiences among “brokering researchers”, in the DR Congo. This workshop forms part of a larger research project involving also Sierra Leone and India.[i] By the concept brokering researchers, we here refer to researchers based in the research setting who regulate the access and flow of knowledge. They are often, in the literature, pejoratively referred to as “local research assistants” or even “fixers”. While accounts of research exploitation have increased in recent years, in large enabled by social media, they go long back in history[ii] and have been articulated in a range of contexts[iii][iv] in and outside of Africa, most recently in Syria[v]. Yet, while research exploitation

seems particularly marked in research conducted in settings marked by armed conflict (which is the focus here) it is certainly not unique to such contexts. [vi]Hence, we encourage also researchers outside conflict research to continue reading and weigh in.

To summarise a long and uncomfortable story: there is (most often) a marked inequality between brokering researchers and “contracting researchers” (i.e. researchers often based in the global North, who contract brokering researchers,). The latter are ones who profit the most, not the least from the research in zones of armed conflict. Publishing on issues based on exciting field data in such zones provides a venue for recognition, citations and further research funding necessary for career advancement. The trouble is that the more brokering researchers are silenced, erased and made invisible in the research texts, the more the contracting researcher appears to benefit from this extractive and exploitative relationship. Not only can he/she write him/herself as the daring and heroic inquirer revealing truths in dangerous places, he/she (by not including the indispensable people as co-writers), can also profit from single (or with other contracting researchers) authored publications. More recently, the silencing of brokering researchers and the promotion of the “contracting researcher Self” has taken the form of indulging in psychological discomforts and so called traumas related to fieldwork. This increasing preoccupation with the psychological and physical well-being of the contracting researcher (https://duckofminerva.com/2019/10/fieldwork-and-your-health.html?fbclid=IwAR2BS8Sz1-gwoDx0Lkkm_IJf3BBtNzzSj88JEVoqCKHf-YNucTkuoo5URng.) often appears as quite unintentionally oblivious to privilege and positionality, disregarding the situation of brokering researchers (<https://www.gicnetwork.be/bukavu-series-waiting-for-the-morning-birds-researcher-trauma-in-insecure-environments/>) and others in the field.

Not seldom and gradually more so, given the increasing securitization of research[vii], such research is often conducted while the contracting researcher remains in the comfort of his/her country, or stays in a comfortable hotel in a safe urban setting in the conflict zone. Hence, it is frequently the brokering researchers based in the research setting who are most at risk, at times (in cases when the contracting researchers follow to the field) arising from contracting researchers’ risky and suspicious behavior (<https://www.gicnetwork.be/lost-in-translation-managing-cultural-differences-in-the-face-of-risk-in-the-field/>). Moreover, brokering researchers regularly do most of the hard work; provide access to the respondents; translate and adapt the methodology (interview guides/survey questions) to the context; collect the data in insecure settings, summarise the data and provide crucial inputs into interpretation, ensure the safety of the researcher, and much more. Yet, brokering researchers most often do so with poor remuneration, no insurance and no/limited funds to cover unexpected costs crucial to their safety in the field. (<https://www.gicnetwork.be/when-you-become-pombe-yangu-my-beer-dealing-with-the-financial-expectations-of-research-participants/>) In addition to this and despite all the work, brokering researchers rarely make it further than the acknowledgement section (sometimes not even that); with slim chances of appearing as co-authors. As Mukungilwa concludes (<https://www.gicnetwork.be/these-phantom-researchers-what-of-their-visibility-in-academic-publications/>) brokering researchers are “like ghosts in the research machine: they are there, but nobody sees them.” A similar situation has been reported also in other contexts, not the least in journalism (https://www.cjr.org/special_report/fixers.php?fbclid=IwAR1UZ3rbPYOJpJh91IRYgW2ILxOkGOvBmhiGIMuwJJKH2ugoMZNrhbhubU).

It seems academia is not much – if at all – any better.

Much can be said about this exploitative and unequal relationship between Global North based researchers and local research brokers that governs research processes in conflict sites in the Global South. The links provided in this text, which include writings by many of the authors, many written within the framework of the *(Silent) Voices* blog (<https://www.gicnetwork.be/silent-voices-blog/>), highlight these problems and we urge our readers to engage with and reflect on these writings in relation to their own research. In the following we shall – rather than repeating experiences better expressed elsewhere – try to be constructive by suggesting measuring standards for more ethical research practices.

What has to change?

Clearly, given the ways in which the current state of affairs is grounded in marked inequalities in economic resources as well as long standing identities, self-perceived entitlements and stereotypes with roots in colonial history, change will not come easily. Yet, while change clearly requires more fundamental transformations, (<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/africa-decolonisation-battle-knowledge-190906074211760.html?fbclid=IwAR31mov1Ln6fEjMeECMVd4za4du1bKr--Am3FRZXMOMGbFEsjbpANm-efhk>) we, would like to focus on measures that various actors in academia could undertake to end this exploitative colonial encounter with brokering researchers in the field.

Firstly, it has to be recognised that the contribution that many brokering researchers make not only merits co-authorship, but also makes non-authorship by brokering researchers both fraudulent and unethical. Recurrent arguments to delegitimise co-authorship (<https://www.gicnetwork.be/these-phantom-researchers-what-of-their-visibility-in-academic-publications/>) are that co-authorship necessitates involvement in two or more parts of the research process (preparation/conceptualisation; data collection; interpretation and writing). This unfairly reduces the role that brokering researchers often play in translating and adapting the methodology and interpretation of the data. Moreover, it unjustly enables the contracting researcher to exclude the brokering researcher by not offering the opportunity to be a co-author. It has also been noticed that on occasions, contracting researchers send texts to brokering researchers with an offer to contribute as a co-author, but with such short notice that it is impossible for him/her to give feedback in time.

Secondly, there is need for better and more transparent remuneration policy in contracts, where the compensation is open for negotiation, rather than presented as a fixed fee. This would remove the fear and anxiety among brokering researchers that any attempt to renegotiate terms of compensation can result in the termination of the contract itself. Moreover, and importantly and as is standard in many other contexts (<https://icsc.un.org/Home/DangerPay>), remuneration has to reflect level of risk.

Thirdly, brokering researchers – who are the ones taking most of the risks (risks which often extend after fieldwork) must be appropriately insured. We need to lobby for access to insurance through formal institutions (which do not exist in many cases at the moment). Yet, until this will be made possible, there must be funds to cover unexpected costs crucial to the health, well-being and safety of brokering researchers (such as in the case of accidents, theft as well as managing intimidation and threats in relation to fieldwork) within overall

project budgets.

Agents responsible for change?

Clearly and as history so astutely demonstrates, change requires much more than appealing to the willingness or consciousness of individual researchers. A more comprehensive approach in which various crucial actors take responsibility and press for change is needed:

Funding agencies and ethics board and committees assessing projects must play a vital role. They need to ask questions about the role and situation of brokering researchers, and also demand details about how the research project addresses the points raised above, before approving any funding. In order for this to be effective, there also needs to be a follow up upon the completion of the project. Both parts of process (assessing a grant/project and follow up) should demand testifying documents from the concerned brokering researchers/partners.

Academic publishers, in particular academic journals also have a great responsibility and role to play in effectuating change. Like funders and ethic review boards, they need to ask questions about the role and situation of brokering researchers; they also need to demand details about how the research project was conducted, addressing the points raised above, before approval of publication. Preferably this should also be accompanied with testifying documents from the concerned brokering researchers/partners – particularly if not included as co-writers.

In addition to the changes that could be facilitated by various agencies, *we can also do much more as individual researchers.* In addition to making our own research practice more ethical, we can also put pressure on fellow colleagues through constructive critique and engagement. In particular, we have a special responsibility as *reviewers of journal articles.* As part of the review process, we must demand clarity about the research process and role of brokering researchers, in any fieldwork based article or book.

Foreclosing possible objections

Given the somewhat sensitive topic of this text we (hopefully wiser from earlier experiences) foresee objections of various sorts. One is: *“well, not just contracting researchers based in the global North engage in exploitative research behaviour, actually ‘we’ (here read: global North researchers) treat them better than researchers based in the global South, and sometimes the reason why the people taking most risks are exploited is that money is skimmed by the principal brokering researcher”.* To objections such as these, our answer would be: *“without doubt, exploitative research behaviour is also prevalent among more privileged researchers in and of the ‘Global South’”.* Yet, that fact does not absolve anyone from responsibility. Rather our call for ethical research behaviour and recognising privilege goes beyond simple North/South divisions.

Another, related, objection we anticipate relate more specifically to the (few) researchers/authors of this text who themselves occupy a privileged position in the Global North: *“Who are these economically and academically privileged researchers/authors? Who are they to criticise and do they think they are better/different?”* The answer to this (for the authors of this text) is *“no, we don’t consider ourselves above these practices and we are fully cognisant of our own complicity in such matters.”* In fact, we would argue that such easy rhetoric and binaries of the good versus the bad, racist/non-racist are counter-

productive. It is absolutely essential to acknowledge that even so called critical and postcolonial scholars, and privileged researchers in the global South, are implicated in exploitative practices, and that we all have to remain hyper-vigilant about our own positionality and complicity.

A further objection – relating more to the practical suggestions – is that: “*these suggestions provide too much power to brokering researchers who can insist on being co-authors even though they have done very little work. They could even untruthfully complain about remuneration and other aspects for their own benefit*”. While such objections, in large, reflect rather problematic stereotypes and a fear of “being used” among contracting researchers (<https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/fciv20/21/2?nav=tocList>), they also fail to acknowledge colonial histories and the continued inequalities in power and resources. Given the pervasive nature of existing inequalities, the greatest risk is that brokering researchers (with the implementation of new standards) will still not be able or willing to claim their rights, as this might adversely affect their livelihood opportunities. Moreover, if some would attempt to “unfairly” use ethical standards to their own benefit, the magnitude of this would be incomparable to the long standing unfair silencing and exploitation embedded in North-South knowledge production.

We hope that our anticipation of the immediate objections to rectify things will enable further debate and reflection. Our suggestions are not set in stone and we simply wish to move things forward in a constructive and empathetic way. If research ethics and human rights are to be taken seriously, we must all bear responsibility and work for transformatory changes to make fieldwork a non-exploitative experience in collaborative knowledge production and community building.



Endnotes

[i] The project is funded by the Swedish Research council, 2017-05575. For details please contact Maria Eriksson Baaz (maria.eriksson_baaz@statsvet.uu.se) (mailto:maria.eriksson_baaz@statsvet.uu.se), Swati Parashar (swati.parashar@gu.se) (<mailto:swati.parashar@gu.se>) and Mats Utas (Mats.Utas@antro.uu.se) (<mailto:Mats.Utas@antro.uu.se>)

[ii] For an overview see see Eriksson Baaz, Maria, and Mats Utas. (2019) “Exploring the Backstage: Methodological and Ethical Issues Surrounding the Role of Research Brokers in Insecure Zones”, in *Civil Wars*, 157-178.

[iii] Cronin-Furman, K. and M. Lake, 2018. “Ethics abroad: fieldwork in fragile and violent contexts.” *PS: Political Science & Politics*: 1-8.

[iv] See Mwambari, D. (2019). Local Positionality in the Production of Knowledge in Northern Uganda. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 18, 1609406919864845.

[v] Sukarieh, M., & Tannock, S. (2019). Subcontracting Academia: Alienation, Exploitation and Disillusionment in the UK Overseas Syrian Refugee Research Industry. *Antipode*, 51(2), 664-680.

[vi] For a recent example see Kalinga, C. (2019). Caught between a rock and a hard place: navigating global research partnerships in the global South as an indigenous researcher. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 31(3), 270-272.

[vii] Peter, M. and F. Strazzari, 2017. “Securitisation of research: fieldwork

under new restrictions in Darfur and Mali." *Third World Quarterly* 38(7): 1531-1550.

[Academe](#), [Bad Social Science](#), [Ethics!](#), [Eurocentrism](#), [Guest Posts](#), [International Relations](#), [Post-Colonialism](#)

2 thoughts on “Moving Out of the Backstage: How Can We Decolonize Research?”

1. [Gunilla Priebe](#)

[OCTOBER 27, 2019 AT 10:06 AM](#)

Is there something similar to the Vancouver author recommendations (<http://www.icmje.org/icmje-recommendations.pdf>) for social science research? The topic for the blog discussion is, of course, not solved in medical research just because we can refer to these recommendations, but they are helpful. E.g. the first Vancouver criteria relate to “the acquisition ... of data” while “acquisition of funding; general supervision of a research group” etc is described as non-author contributions, i.e. these recommendations emphasize fieldwork rather than office work. Could a way forward be a joint call for an extension of these recommendations to all forms of research and for funders, journals etc to demand that these are explicitly discussed in funding proposals, article submissions etc?

REPLY

2. Pingback: [Field research and Covid-19 in East Africa: Ethical and Pragmatic Challenges for Research Design, Data Collection, and Equity – Digital Fieldwork](#)

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