"People come and go but we don't see anything": How Might Social Research Contribute to Social Change?

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Abstract

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Keywords

Social Research, Empowerment, Praxis-Oriented Research, Social Change, Communities, People's Lives

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In different fields of study, scholars interested in making a positive difference in the lives of their research communities insist on engaging policy makers and activists in their work. Paulo Freire, one of the most widely known public intellectuals, asserts that praxis enables critical thought, awareness and collaborative action for emancipation for oppressed groups. Within this framework, our contribution aims to provoke thinking on the need for accountability to research subjects in development research through an emphasis on producing policy-focused and change-driven, as opposed to purely theoretically oriented, knowledge. The overarching argument is that research should, in fact, be conscious and proactive about its contribution to positive social change. Drawing on primary data gathered through field research in Ghana between 2010 and 2016, the paper highlights respondent fatigue/distrust, cross-cultural translation, and the peculiarities of the diasporic researcher as some of the methodological challenges faced in the attempt to align one's research towards the pursuit of positive social change. Some modest suggestions are provided regarding how to enhance the impact of research for social transformation. Keywords: Social Research, Empowerment, Praxis-Oriented Research, Social Change, Communities, People's Lives

Introduction

> Theory is always *for* someone and *for* some purpose [...] There is, accordingly, no such thing as theory in itself, divorced from a standpoint in time and space. (Cox, 1981, p. 128)

The theory-practice divide is present in many social science fields (see Cox, 1981; Hill & Beshoff, 1994; Kurki, 2006; Smith, 2002). For instance, many highly ranked journals place an emphasis on theory—some even expecting to see evidence of a "new" theory before accepting a paper for publication. In development studies, such discussions previously centred on the divide between indigenous and scientific knowledge, particularly around who speaks for the poor and what knowledge is deemed legitimate (see Agrawal, 1995; Briggs, 2005, 2013; Chambers, 2013; Watts, 1993). Although development studies is currently informed by the rich experience of many practitioners, the discussion of whether it should be focused on theory or practice and the practical relevance of development research has happened before (Black, 1991; Narman, 1997; Schuurman, 1994).

These disciplinary divisions are obviously arbitrary, but the debate still remains in many fields over the real essence of research – whether for theory development, policy-relevant outcomes, emancipation or a mix of these elements. Even though critical theory is often

contrasted with problem-solving theory with the latter having some hegemony over the former, it appears that a praxis-oriented researcher might need to embrace elements of both to achieve their objectives (Andrews, 2013). This suggests that politics and theory are inseparable since in most cases they are both embedded in complex relations of power (Duvall & Varadarajan, 2003; see also McMichael, 2012). In fact, the aims of critical theory are as practical as problem-solving theory even though "it approaches practice from a perspective which transcends that of the existing order… Critical theory allows for a normative choice in favour of a social and political order different from the prevailing order…" (Cox, 1981, p. 130). It is often the normative aspects of social research that point to ways in which positive change can occur. While mainstream development research has often maintained a normative stance by claiming to be practice-oriented, this cannot be taken for granted since it is evident that years of "practice" and interventions have not necessarily yielded immense benefits for the purported beneficiaries of that endeavour (Andrews & Bawa, 2014; Collier, 2007; Escobar, 2012).

Inasmuch as theory is relevant, one needs to examine its purpose. Theory for the sake of theory may be useful in some circles but in the context within which we conduct our research, we have noticed the utility in being accountable to research subjects in ways that help in possibly transforming their lives for the better. The argument here is that praxis-oriented research enhances the potential of marginalized groups to become empowered. Empowerment here implies acquiring the necessary skills to influence decision-making, but it underscores power and agency as "it also facilitates individuals/community to see that they are capable of constructing and using their own knowledge" (Cordeiro, Soares, & Rittenmeyer, 2017, p. 400). In essence, social and development research should be conscious of and proactive about its contribution to this kind of positive social change. While a number of activist-scholars already pursue the change agenda, many social researchers are unable to make this endeavour a key aspect of their work for a number of reasons – hence the frustration in the statement "people come and go but we don't see anything" noted in the title of this contribution.

In the first place, our respective positionalities as male and female "diaspora researchers" going back to collect data on a topic of interest to us partly helps us to understand the statement captured in the title of the paper. The research projects we reflect upon in this paper were undertaken both during periods when we were enrolled in PhD programs (i.e., 2010 for S. Bawa and 2013 for N. Andrews) and periods when we were no longer considered as "students" (i.e., beyond 2015). Considering our situatedness as researchers "from abroad," our perceived (or real) positions of power informed why respondents felt the need to complain about not seeing anything come out of previous participation in research – perhaps with the intent that things will be different with us. This underscores the fact that "fieldwork is intensely personal" for both the researcher and participants – meaning our positions of class, sex and ethnicity inevitably play a role in the research process as well as the final outcome (Palaganas, Sanchez, Molintas, Visitacion & Caricativo, 2017, p. 428).

The geographical location of these studies was Ghana and the focus ranged from the dialectics of women's empowerment in a postcolonial context, corporate social responsibility of foreign mining companies to the issue of oil and livelihoods in Ghana's nascent hydrocarbon sector. In each of these projects, research participants included ordinary community members, non-governmental organizations, and other power brokers such as traditional authority, government policy makers, and corporate executives. Specific quotations and insights below will highlight both the diversity of research participants and our own experiences on the field, but a common thread among the various projects was the emphasis on sustainable livelihoods, social change, and discourses of empowerment. As Ghanaian scholars with the opportunity of being affiliated with notable academic institutions in Canada, we have been interested in these themes because of our hope and intention that our scholarly endeavours could contribute to specific changes in policy or decision-making processes as well as practical changes in

communities where people live their daily lives. In essence, it is this overarching objective that has driven our respective research projects and our interest in reflecting upon existing barriers and opportunities for research to contribute to social change in places such as Ghana and beyond.

We divide the rest of the paper into three parts beginning with a brief assessment of existing scholarship on praxis-oriented research. The subsequent section applies the theoretical discussion to our research context (i.e., Ghana) to ascertain the complexities involved in conducting field research in that milieu. This section represents the crux of this contribution where we explore respondent fatigue/distrust, cross-cultural translation, and the peculiarities of the diasporic researcher as some of the specific methodological issues that inhibit the effective alignment of one's research to the pursuit of social change goals. The concluding section provides indication of how some of the identified challenges may be averted in order for social research to contribute to positive social change. Having already noted the divisions that prevail in diverse fields of study, the ensuing discussions focus more on such debates in development studies since that field better suits the regional focus of our research as well as the approaches used for our respective projects. This is because development studies, as a nebulous field, is interdisciplinary in scope and draws from various disciplinary perspectives. We must also note that although this is collaborative work, the paper uses "N. Andrews" and "S. Bawa" in some sections due to the specific individual fieldwork insights recounted.

Praxis-Oriented Research: Brief Theoretical Survey

It has been argued that "while theoretical relevance tends to show some fruitful tendencies, the impact on policy from Development Studies has traditionally been weak" (Narman, 1997, p. 217). Part of the problem is that there are a number of people who have made a living out of "development," and such practitioners are likely to readily dismiss academic professionals as being mainly theoretical. This perception often tends to be the case because "high academic status [is] acquired not by simplifying matters, but rather by making the reality more difficult to understand. This [is] achieved by obscure language and complicated grammar" (Narman, 1997, p. 217). This characterization implies that the division between theory and practice might continue to exist until such a time where scholars or academics are able and willing to discuss development in language that is accessible to the everyday person whom development is purported to serve and also to the category of people Chambers (1997) refers to as "normal professionals." Praxis-oriented research requires that even theorists get "out of their ivory tower to espouse theories that are self-critical, meaningful and continually relevant to the *human* experiences of the agents/subjects they study" (Andrews, 2013, p. 72). Particularly in so-called "developing" countries, an action-focused approach is quintessential to the survival of many people whose lives could be made better through innovative research-based livelihood solutions.

Paulo Freire, in one of his canonical books, *Pedagogy of Freedom,* highlights the importance of praxis but also elucidates how "critical reflection of practice is a requirement of the relationship between theory and practice. Otherwise theory becomes simply 'blah, blah, blah,' and practice, pure activism" (Freire, 1998, p. 30). He believes curiosity should be at the centre of every educational endeavour and individuals should have the freedom to choose to advance causes that violate conventional social norms thereby resulting in social change; both learning and activism are therefore fundamental to human life. On the research field itself, the quest to enhance the participation and active engagement of marginalized groups has led to a number of methodological strategies such as participatory action research (Cordeiro et al., 2017; Whyte, 1991) and participatory rural appraisal (Chambers, 1992, 1994a, b), both having roots in activist participatory research methods. These methods embrace local ownership of

knowledge while facilitating social change through the empowerment of rural and poor populations (Chambers 1995). Many development researchers and practitioners have picked up these grounded activist approaches, as they attempt to give voice to the marginalized and are indeed more people-centred (Bradshaw & Linneker 2003; Gough, Langevang, & Namatovu, 2013; Pellegrini, 2012; Thomas, Muradian, de Groot, & de Ruijter, 2010).

In such fields as health, social care and education, the focus on praxis-oriented research is widespread (Breunig, 2005; Broom, Broom, Kirby, & Scambler, 2017; Glassman & Erdem, 2014; Musker & Kagan, 2011). Having said that, community-based participatory approaches cannot be taken for granted. International organizations such as the World Bank have popularized concepts such as "community-driven development," indicating that local populations have some form of ownership over development projects. But research has shown that such processes are often subject to elite capture and do exhibit several constraints that often inhibit the effective targeting of the poor and their needs (Dasgupta & Beard, 2007; Labonne & Chase, 2011; Mansuri & Rao, 2004; Platteau & Gaspart, 2003). This evidence possibly suggests that researchers should proactively embrace an action-oriented stance in order to identify and solve some of the existing constraints that prevent local communities from maintaining ownership over and having a voice in projects that are meant to benefit them.

Academic research into social problems has largely focused on studying and understanding "the problem." There is an appreciation that understanding the problem—that is, its roots (history) and the way it is reproduced—will lead to more transformative solutions. Public intellectualism and public intellectual research are motivated by a goal of educating the masses in hopes of empowering ordinary people. Empowered with knowledge, people are more likely to participate actively and truly in decision-making processes and propose solutions fully aware of their circumstances (Collins, 1989). This type of research, while action oriented, is not always policy oriented. Its action orientation is geared towards the education of people/the masses. In this sense, while Marxism has largely been looked at in theoretical terms, in its simplest form, the expose of capitalism provides critical knowledge to the masses (i.e., the proletariat) to enable a revolt—one which Marx imagines will lead to the utopia of communism (Derrida, 1994).

Similarly, Paolo Friere's writing on the diffused nature and workings of oppression is action-oriented in the sense that it aims to educate the general population. In more contemporary times, Patricia Hill Collins, Bell Hooks, Gyariati Spivak and Chandra Mohanty among others have helped to expose the false binary between theory and practice by speaking to issues of power and privilege in academic and literary theorizations. In particular, Patricia Collins has postulated that experience from oppressed groups in particular count as knowledge that must help contextualize theories (see Collins, 1990). In line with Freire's thoughts, Collins and her colleagues discuss the need to link experience with structures of oppression. This call for a sociological lens in understanding and contextualizing experience as knowledge is crucial in exposing the ways in which larger systems and historical processes support the reproduction of oppression in the present day.

Complexity of Research in an African Context & the Quest for Social Change

Field research everywhere has a number of complexities and challenges (see Katz, 1994; Kobayashi, 1994; Li, 2008; Lunn, 2014; Punch, 2012). However, there are certain peculiarities that pertain more to some locations than others. In the case of Africa, the challenges that are known to be associated with fieldwork include the general access to data and the diversity of the field or the lack thereof (Lages, Pfajfar, & Shoham, 2015); the fear, isolation and insecurity in "conflict zones" (Begley, 2009; see also Suarez, 2017); and the tension between emotions and participation in the case of "violence research" (Diphoorn,

2012). One other issue is what Fraser (2012) refers to as the "throwntogetherness" of research practices—a phenomenon where research in Africa is judged with the same criteria of "feasibility" as research in other regions even when specific conditions are different. The pages below highlight some of the challenges we have faced in our individual encounters with research participants on the field in Ghana, which mainly cover issues of respondent fatigue, translational dilemmas with respect to language and the peculiar challenge we faced as Ghanaian diaspora researchers "going home" to collect data. As argued, we believe these impediments limit the overall contribution of research to the pursuit of meaningful social change.

Africa has suffered tremendously from epistemic oppression, violence and misrepresentation in academic and travel writing (Andrews & Okpanachi, 2012; Mbembé, 2010; Mohanty, 1988). Needless to reiterate, until very recently, the single-sided story of the continent as a place of war, disease and backwardness has dominated academic discourses since Africa appeared on the map. What has been missing in these writings is the historical context within which Africa as a continent emerged. This has not only limited the possibilities of producing knowledge that captures historically rooted truths of the nations but also obscures certain knowledge and research paradigms as non-scientific or not as academically rigorous as those from elsewhere. For instance, a number of scholars have decried the problematic constructions of gender and gendered relations in Africa based on white feminist experiences or Eurocentric notions of gender (Amadiume, 1997; Oyĕwùmí, 1997).

This aside, it is important to note that the social locations and standpoint of researchers not only influence research findings and outcomes, but also affects the kind of social change that occurs in communities if policy relies on such finding. This makes it very difficult to propose policy recommendations based on single studies. Our experiences in conducting research in Ghana, as differently located individuals conducting research on different "social problems" with different goals and research paradigms, will shed more light on the complexities of making one's research align with broader goals of social improvement.

It is crucial at this juncture to provide a brief description of the respective studies that inform the methodological reflections undertaken in this paper. As alluded to above, the project undertaken by N. Andrews were focused on the extractive industries including mining and oil and gas sectors. The research design as well as data collection techniques were approved by the research ethics boards of the researcher's institution of affiliation at the time (i.e., University of Alberta and Queen's University). Instruments used in collecting primary data included a pilot street-level survey, participant observation, in-depth semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions. The sample population for these various data collection techniques were purposively selected in order to capture more depth and include the variety of stakeholders in the extractive industry such as government officials, representatives of international organizations, civil society groups, community-based organizations, extractive corporations, and members of impacted communities. With the permission of respondents, interviews and focus group discussions were tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim and subsequently subjected to thematic coding along with field notes to identify patterns. It was at this point that the methodological issues being reflected upon in this paper were revealed, resulting in this collaborative piece with S. Bawa who also saw such patterns in the qualitative data she analyzed. This implies that while the bigger projects covered many themes (for examples of recent publications based on these projects, see Andrews, 2016, 2018, 2019; Osei-Kojo & Andrews, 2018), this contribution focuses specifically on those findings that advance knowledge around some of the methodological challenges one can encounter during the research process and the implications of such difficulties for social change-driven research.

S. Bawa's project sought to explore discourses of women's rights and empowerment in Ghana. The project explored various intersections of culture, history, political economy and

women's identity construction processes (for examples of recent publications based on this project, see Bawa, 2016, 2019). Primary data was collected through ethnography and detailed studies of women's and feminist social movements and mobilizations, focus group discussions, semi-structured individual interviews and life histories. Participants were drawn from a diverse group of women (and a small percentage of men) across the country. However, all participants had post-secondary levels of education. Secondary sources of data included various human rights reports, documents and instruments, the Constitution of Ghana, UN and international conventions and policy documents on women's rights and empowerment. Similarly, interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, coded and analyzed. With a postcolonial African feminist theoretical framework, S. Bawa used a combination of deconstructionism, critical discourse and textual analyses to tease out the nuances of the themes generated from the data. With most of the participants in this project heavily involved in (and in some cases pioneers of) women's rights activism and grassroots organizations working toward the empowerment of women at various levels, they shared insights on challenges in advocating for women's rights in a postcolonial society where culture is often employed as justification for rights violations. During the extensive field/site visits and ethnography, the issue of over-researched populations and topics came up again and again. In fact, several participants decried the continuous exploitation of poor women and communities in and for research/policy piloting and implementation purposes by academics, policy makers and NGOs. It is important to note that part of the motivation for this project stemmed from motivations to move away from the tired development images and portrayals of African women as rural, poor, disempowered and oppressed. S. Bawa's work generally analyses how development discourses, policy and projects can and often disempower by ignoring women's agency in their socio-cultural and economic environments and contexts.

Distrust and Respondent Fatigue

Under this section, we discuss multiple pieces of evidence from our respective studies that support our analysis of respondent fatigue and distrust in the research process. The expression "people come and go but we don't see anything" reflects a general perception that some local research participants have of researchers. This expression comes with the frustration of speaking out or participating in research without a clear evidence of its utility in improving people's living conditions. It seems that if nothing is done, there might be a time where disadvantaged communities may no longer be willing to participate in research or would demand immediate monetary compensation before contributing. Although there are many community members who are willing to participate in research, the level of interest is dwindling due to an overall sense of what can be called "respondent fatigue." A Technical Director at the Ministry of Lands and Natural Resources, for instance, expressed dismay about the fact that several researchers fail to share their findings and recommendations after they have received immense contributions from many local respondents. Before taking up this position, he had worked at Ghana's Minerals Commission for 16 years. These years of experience informed his frustration:

> [Respondent]: When I was [at] the Minerals Commission, a lot of people came for research. I helped them and here I'm doing the same. At the end of the day we don't see what they have found.
> [N. Andrews]: As in you don't get a copy?
> [Respondent]: Yes, but it's not only in Ghana. Some come from Germany [and] elsewhere. If you come and do your research about us and we don't see the recommendations then it's not worth the time wasted. And your inputs that will

improve [our system] has been shelved somewhere. So first of all, I will appeal that those of you who come to do research in your own country should ensure that your findings get way to your country so that whatever you expect can be done. (Interview, July 2013, Accra)

The above observation is important for at least a couple of reasons. First, it explains why some government functionaries and policy makers do not prioritize interviews that are arranged by researchers. For example, N. Andrews had to make three separate trips on different days to this respondent's office in Accra before the interview was finally possible. This was a result of previous appointments that were canceled due to other more important ministerial meetings. Secondly, the observation also underscores the practical challenges of getting one's research findings back into the country where fieldwork was conducted and particularly in the hands of people who can spearhead the needed changes. Despite the frustration expressed above, it is plausible that some researchers have strived to return findings and recommendations, but these results have not reached the right people. However, the fact that research findings do not end up in the right hands—thereby not having a direct positive implication on policy or people's lives—underlie the issue of "not seeing anything."

There are cases where distrust, apathy and fatigue are not solely caused by the lack of accountability on the part of researchers but rather a long-standing issue of general distrust of anyone collecting any sort of information. For instance, N. Andrews received a hostile reception at both Akoti and Etwebo (twin mining communities in Ghana) where potential participants did not mince words in saying "no," with no specific reason other than the point that they did not trust him. It was later on that another man intimated that the lack of trust is due to the two communities' prevailing grievances against the mining companies present. For several years, the community members have remained disgruntled about the amount of compensation given to cocoa farmers who lost their farms due to mining operations. To them, there have been so many people coming in, to interview community members, but with no significant impact on their lives in the end. Besides this point, the people's reluctance in being part of the study was a result of the history of arrests that have been commissioned by the company (with state support) due to views and opposition expressed by community members. For this reason, some people thought the company had sent N. Andrews to "spy" on them and therefore made up their minds even prior to inspecting his ID card. Having a "trusted" community member as an informant was useful in this regard as he was able to convince others to participate. Given that this occurred during the pilot phase of the study, people were more receptive once N. Andrews returned for the longer fieldwork.

Similarly, some women participants in a focus group discussion N. Andrews organized lamented bitterly about their experience with "student" researchers who had been to their houses to collect all kinds of data without any specific return to them in the end:

[Woman 1]: There were some university students who came here to inquire about our health and asked us to fill some forms, which we still do have some in our rooms, but till date we have not heard from them. I kept the records of the analyses they undertook but they have done nothing till date.
[Woman 2]: As for me I told them they just wanted to use us to make money (the other woman giggled in agreement to her assertion). For me even if after the analysis they gave me money to cater for my health, I would not have had any problem. So for me I told them that as much as possible they should not use my state, that is, my ailment to make money. And ever since they have not been here. (interview transcript, May 2013, Kenyase no. 1)

Based on the remarks by the two women above, it can be asserted that some research participants believe there is monetary value associated with information that is collected, or at least they are made to think in that manner due to the sort of questions asked about their economic well-being. It also reflects the power positions research participants see researchers as occupying—hence the expectation to notice some improvement in their lives as being an outcome of research. This means that even those claiming to be "student researchers" are considered to possess some power to make their lives better. Distrust therefore builds up when such high expectations are met with zero or negligible quantitative/qualitative benefits for participation in research.

We must admit that it is onerous to imagine going back to every single interviewee to inform him or her of the outcome of one's research. However, social change could still occur if such research is made relevant and accessible to policy makers in these jurisdictions. This also requires the researcher to be active in making their research known to the broader community in a manner that is comprehensible to the intended audiences. The fatigue and mistrust expressed above is captured and replicated in S. Bawa's field research experiences with women's rights activists. In this case, participants discussed mistrust for feminist activists and narrated stories from community members who were "tired of contradictory messages" they were receiving from women's rights activists. To this point, a participant decried that feminism in Ghana and its message for women was not home-grown:

> When I did my national service,[1] I happened to work with a few organizations that had interests in women's rights. I think when it [feminism/women's rights] first started, every other woman responded positively to the feminist idea so they thought feminists were championing their cause but I think along the line, people got disgruntled. Most women are very cynical when they see a feminist. They are very very cynical. They don't really think [a feminist] is someone who is interested in their interests only somebody who is interested in whatever she herself is thinking. (Interview, July 2010, Accra)

Similarly, another participant attributed the problem of mistrust and people's fatigue of feminists' activism and agendas to its reliance on western models of empowerment:

> I also think that feminism is not home-grown. It is sort of from the west and we have some NGOs supporting women's rights and somebody hijacks the idea here and starts talking about feminism. I think so-called feminists are just opportunists, frankly. It's *not an organic movement that promotes women's interests in Africa.* I think it's just hijacked from western donors or western organizations who have money to spend and people use it [feminism] as a mouthpiece to get money or get time on radio or TV shows, promoting their interests and not the interests of some women in somewhere [like] Nima or Madina or Haatso [names of some 'poor' communities in Accra] or of some child somewhere […] So I'm suspicious of them [feminists] frankly. (Interview, July 2010, Accra)

The lack of trust and presence of participant fatigue expressed here translate easily into difficulty in recruiting participants for studies on "women's rights" or women's empowerment. Responses from organizations and individuals S. Bawa approached to have discussions, similar

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[1] National service is a mandatory service rendered to the state upon the completion of a state-funded tertiary institution.

to the above, revolved around the fact that they (local populations) were over studied. This also raises important questions around the gaze in research design. Why are certain topics and populations more appealing to researchers? Irrespective of theoretical orientation, intention or direction of research, most researchers who do field research in Africa enter the field with pre-determined research questions and interests. It is clear then that what is researched is determined by the researcher, intended to serve individual/institutional purposes foremost. This also implies that, fundamentally, the knowledge production process at this micro level involves invisible and undemocratic power dynamics where a single researcher or group of researchers' narrow gaze is imposed on a community that may otherwise be interested in other things— representing what Limes-Taylor Henderson and Esposito (2017) observe as using people/others "in the nicest way possible." Since research begets research, researchers generate interests and questions that pique the curiosity of other researchers who scramble to "re-search" communities and people in hopes of uncovering the next "big thing" in academic research. This phenomenon is part of what drives the mistrust and fatigue we have discussed here—and the lack of trust and respondent fatigue in turn contribute to the challenges praxis-oriented researchers face in making their work count for positive social change.

The "Foreign" Language Dilemma and Cross-Cultural Translations

Part of the complexity of doing field research in Ghana has to do with language. Some researchers have written about their experience of doing research in linguistically "foreign" territories and how that results in a number of challenges in the field (see Gent, 2014; Kamwendo, 2008). Our case was quite different as it entailed translating terms that are "foreign" to research subjects. Although English is the official language, not all rural dwellers are well versed in it in order to sustain a meaningful conversation. Even in cases where they are, the sort of diction used by researchers who have been trained abroad may not appeal to them. To cite an example, N. Andrews faced a challenge translating a key concept such as "corporate social responsibility" into the local language in a sensible manner. This was the case for all community interviews and focus group discussions with the less-educated in mining communities. The focus, therefore, ended up being on "benefits" and "as3de3"—a local parlance that translates as "responsibility." Due to N. Andrews' fluency in the language spoken by the target group of respondents, he initially took it for granted that certain ideas and concepts that were captured in the interview and focus group guide will require more work in terms of making them sensible to certain aspects of life respondents are used to.

The language issue influences the questions to be asked and the manner in which they are asked, as key terms are lost in translation and there is not much the researcher can do about it even when s/he is adequately proficient in both foreign and local languages (for instance, see Court & Abbas, 2013). This is because information received or data collected, using the local language as a medium is also diluted once it is subject to transcription into English. These days, some scholars attempt to deal with this challenge by using key phrases in the local language or dialect that simply cannot be adequately translated. However, not all journals accept this style of writing. In cases where such language is deemed acceptable and publishable, authors are still made to arbitrarily provide English translations at least as a footnote with the goal of making the work accessible to a global audience. Yet, this so-called "global" audience usually ends up excluding the researched communities and populations. In the case involving mining and oil communities, core theories used in international studies and development studies (fields of study with which both N. Andrews and S. Bawa are associated) hardly speak to the lived realities of these local populations—for instance, considering the western origins of these ideas (see Andrews & Okpanachi, 2012; Odoom & Andrews, 2017). The only way published research, if translated into the local languages of researched communities, would make sense

to them would be if their socio-cultural philosophies are used in place of Eurocentric theories. In the absence of this, it is difficult for research to adequately capture the experiences of participants—let alone contribute effectively to the change that may be needed in these settings.

The language issue goes beyond that of translation from English to the local language. The problem of translation from context-specific English to academic writing is also a prominent challenge. There are nuances that are lost in the process of translation and interpretation from the Ghanaian cultural context to this particular academic context. The cultural contexts that we are referring to are both material and abstract. Participants' lived realities are translated into academic writing and language that can be considered foreign in various ways to the participants' lives. While the participants of S. Bawa spoke in mostly English, it was conversational Ghanaian English. Various expressions could not be translated into formal English. Moreover, emphatic emotional remarks participants made during interviews could not be easily described in the write up. In addition to this, the non-spoken communications or gestures, body language and locally specific cultural references have not made it into the transcripts because both the English language that S. Bawa is familiar with and the academic writing required have only limited space for such nuance.

As noted above, and in discussions following, S. Bawa's "situatedness" as a Ghanaian woman who grew up and spent most of her life in Ghana added to the complexity of translating these transcripts. This also impacted her interactions with research participants in various ways. For instance, in describing various experiences, women participants would sometimes say "you (as a woman) know what I'm talking about, don't you"? Or "As you know, *our* lives as Ghanaian women…"; or "in our part of the world," etc. These remarks were made on grounds of a perceived common understanding of shared experiences, beliefs and knowledge of life in Ghana for women. This kind of perceived sameness represents what Obasi (2014) explores as Black or "Africanist Sista-hood" in the research process. While S. Bawa queried these assumptions or the extent to which we shared these understandings and beliefs, she also understood in a practical sense what participants were referring to. In many of her interview discussions and conversations, prior to and post interviews, differences in ethnic origin while clear from our names, was never quite brought into discussions. Therefore, the assumptions of commonality of experiences were based solely on dominant conceptions of what we (as Ghanaian women) assumed to be common to "all Ghanaian women." These assumptions around identity, race and the noted issue of cross-cultural translation combine to undermine what may be the social change goals of one's research agenda.

The Peculiarities of the Diasporic Scholar

Closely related to the points raised above is the problem of inhabiting, working from and translating in and through hybrid spaces. The scholar in the diaspora is an enviable position, and such a person is often not treated as a "naïve researcher" as Gokah (2006) calls it, unless the intonation or accent resembles that of a "foreigner." Sometimes people associate this diaspora position with certain privileges in terms of easy access to information during field research, but this is not the case. In fact, the diasporic scholar may be seen to have more "indigenous" rights and privileges than the "foreigner." Yet in most cases, the status of the academic "homecomer" comes with much complexity that border on one's identity as insider or outsider. Temitope Oriola recounts his experience in Nigeria in the following passage:

> Returning to Nigeria immediately reminded me of the complexities of identity.
> Here, being "Nigerian" can be significant, but it provides little discriminatory
> power. Instead, one must negotiate myriad identity markers pertaining to

language, religion and kinship, all of which often speak to one's class position.
(Oriola & Haggerty, 2012, p. 543)

The fact that one looks like the research participants and perhaps speaks their native language is expected to provide a general sense of belonging and acceptance. However, overall access to information is not necessarily a privilege of the "homecomer." In fact, it has been noted that "Western-trained researchers returning to developing countries may find themselves [as] cultural aliens even in societies they presume to know too well" (Oriola & Haggerty, 2012, p. 547). Based on our experiences, it appears a non-Ghanaian researcher might have better access to primary information than a Ghanaian researcher from abroad. In some instances, it seemed probably better to not disclose one's origin if only that was permissible under the ethics requirements of our respective institutions. A Ghanaian jargon jokingly referred to as "PHD" (i.e., "pull-him-down") surrounds the familiarity-breeds-contempt notion and leads to people not providing one with requisite information for a number of unknown reasons. As anecdotal evidence, a number of our friends in the diaspora studying at different universities in North America and Europe have shared similar experiences. If the goal of research is to advance some kind of change, as we have explored so far, then the peculiar positioning of the diasporic researcher introduces a number of complexities that defy easy prognosis.

One officer N. Andrews interacted with indicated there is no way he could allocate 30 minutes or less for an interview even when given an open timeframe of three to four months. Another colleague frankly intimated that it is possible his colleagues are appearing to be busy in order to feel important. Whether this is true or not, the fact is that the researcher from the diaspora is not privileged because they hail from their region/country of study. It is already known that access to elites is particularly difficult due to the "establish[ed] barriers that set their members apart from the rest of society" (Hertz & Imber, 1993, p. 3). While access is generally considered to be one of the major setbacks to doing research in Africa (Lages et al., 2015; Mathee et al., 2010), we found that there are certain peculiar issues the diasporic researcher faces with regard to access—some of which are based on respondents' perception of academic "homecomers" as being entitled due to their supposed familiarity with the context.

A researcher from North America, for example, is likely to take e-mails for granted and actually expect people to pay attention to such correspondence. On the field, however, one is met with poor internet connectivity in some instances and participants not responding to their e-mails in a timely manner even when they have access. In essence, e-mails do not necessarily facilitate the process of getting the needed participants for a study. Although most government offices required letters of information or invitation to be on official (university) letterheads, there was no evidence that doing so sped up the process of scheduling interviews. Our point here is that the sort of accountability or "giving back" that may be expected of researchers is often not equated with the challenges that specific groups of researchers face by virtue of their identities and situatedness as either insiders or outsiders.

The ambivalent insider-outsider position of the academic "homecomer" (see Cui, 2015; Oriola & Haggerty, 2012) is accentuated by the many demands of research participants, which range from handing out cash, buying refreshments and phone-calling cards, and linking them up with some "obroni"[2] who could help transform their lives. For instance, some leaders of community-based organizations felt N. Andrews was in a vantage position to help them secure foreign funding for the work they are doing in mining communities. One of them went to the extent of handing him photocopies of all the legal documents of the organization. N. Andrews had to be generally receptive to this action though he knew it was going to be impossible to offer the kind of help expected of him. We believe part of the reason this occurs so often is the

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[2] This is the parlance for a "white person," even though it also does encompass all non-black Africans.

fact that past participation in research did not benefit them in a conspicuous manner. Thus, if they were to continue speaking, then some upfront reciprocity is expected. S. Bawa also had some potential interviewees asking straightforwardly "what's in it for me," which symbolizes a direct reciprocal expectation from qualitative data collection (see a similar discussion in Chege, 2015). Part of the challenge explored in this sub-section deals with "the ambiguity of boundaries" (Sherif 2001), which underscores the issue of locating oneself in the fieldwork context while at the same time ensuring that such situatedness neither perpetuates unrealizable expectations from participants nor increase the extent of bias in one's findings. As discussed, the challenge of navigating these complex corridors of researcher-participant relationships does have tremendous implications for the contribution of research towards positive social change.

Concluding Remarks

What can field researchers do to reverse some of what is described above? To be specific, how might social research contribute to social change in a manner that makes research more oriented towards the needs and expectations of the communities and peoples that we research? It has been argued that "decolonizing of the mind must be done through a dialectical dialogue in constant contact with the realities of the field – at home and away" (Narman, 1997, p. 225). In social research, this constant reflection is needed to ensure the goal of contributing to policy discussions is not left on the margins. This is a conscious undertaking if indeed active participation in research and related activities is meant to empower marginalized people. To be clear, "empowerment and participation are deeply complementary and can be considered both means and ends, processes and outcomes" (Pettit, 2012, p. 2). Thus, beyond specific actionable returns that one could accrue from field research, the participation of subjects in one's research should change something—even if it only illuminates their agency by empowering them to see their world/existence differently or to explore potential alternatives.

A preliminary survey of the local communities to be involved is usually essential to gauge the direction of one's research. The utility of a pilot study in directing and possibly refocusing field research is captured by van Teijlingen and Hundley (2001). One major thing it can do for praxis-oriented research is to enhance access into communities and the lives of participants. Once some familiarity is established, it becomes easier to make the main field trip(s) which should entail more than a one-time fly-in-fly-out occurrence. The initial visit could also draw attention to some embedded issues that may be unknown to people who do not spend time in building initial relationships. For instance, the pilot study that preceded the mining sector research conducted by N. Andrews directed him to a different understanding of the complex relationship between local authorities (i.e., chiefs and elders), the mining companies, and the communities at large, especially showing how some of the chiefs were regarded by affected communities as being "bedfellows" of the companies under study. Without the initial survey, he would have been blind-sided to taking the chiefs' role as necessarily authoritative and representative of the average communities' concerns. Not every social researcher can become an ethnographer but investing time in knowing the people to be studied helps to direct the research to areas where change can best be initiated—particularly areas where the people to be "re-searched" see the need for change.

In a more concrete manner, researchers conducting research on specific countries in Africa should endeavour to share their findings with respective agencies that may be expected to implement changes in these countries. This suggests that while it is useful to be critical and engage in discourse analysis and deconstruction of taken-for-granted ideas and practices, such analyses should be complemented with clear actionable options for the people under study. Additionally, sharing findings with formal government authorities and NGOs should be different from how information is shared with local populations, community-based

organizations and other grassroots activist groups. In a highly competitive "publish-or-perish" academic world, most of us in the academy fail to carefully disseminate our findings in a manner that the "locals" would understand or be able to effectively utilize.

Knowledge produced by research has become a commodity of exchange in the academic political economy: "Tenure, promotion, peer recognition, research grants, and countless smaller codes of privilege are accorded through the adding up of articles, books, papers in 'refereed' journals and conferences…" but this usually leaves nothing for the people and communities we extract this knowledge from (Hall, 1992, p. 25). If social accountability of research is at issue here, then attention needs to be paid to how researchers "give back" to communities in more accessible ways. This can be done through community fora and other participatory grassroots approaches that help local people imagine in their own ways and on their own terms how they can make their lives better—an undertaking that gives theory (and research) an explicit social purpose. Beyond what field researchers can do, a couple of things are important to note. First, funding organizations will need to encourage and purposively fund research projects that give premium to direct community participation and benefit. Second, the traditional ways in which knowledge from social research disseminates (e.g., via journal articles and books) will have to change to include different dissemination outlets that are not simply hailed as innovative but are actually accepted by tenure and promotion committees as equally meaningful ways of contributing to knowledge. These two final points underscore the very ethical basis of knowledge acquisition, production and dissemination—which remains fundamental to an assessment of how social research can "truly" contribute to social transformation.

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