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Chapter

The role of research assistants in qualitative and cross-cultural social sciences research

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Abstract

Cross-cultural research frequently involves working with research assistants to conduct data collection activities. Due to the range of different functions that research assistants end up fulfilling, from translator to guide to gatekeeper, it is clear that their participation in the research project has implications for the quality of the study design, its process and outcomes. However, their role is not always explored. Drawing on our own research as well as that of others, this chapter discusses a set of key practical decisions researchers need to make when planning their fieldwork – from assessing whether a research assistant is needed to managing a work relation. We show how these practical considerations are intertwined with the power asymmetries rooted in the employment relation between researcher and research assistant. We also explore how the triangular power dynamics between research participants, research assistants, and researchers influence the research process and outcomes, as well as how these power dynamics reflect the broader institutional research landscape, in which questions of power, ownership and extraction are prominent. Researchers need to reflect, discuss and write more on this topic to fulfil a crucial gap in the literature on research methodology, to provide practical guidance for future researchers, and to identify the basis for fairer collaborations between North and South research institutions.

Keywords: research assistants; qualitative research; social science; development; fieldwork; Africa

1. Introduction

Qualitative research in the social sciences is often reliant on the work of research assistants, even more so when it is conducted in lower income countries and cross-cultural settings. Whilst anthropological, ethnographic and feminist literature has historically been more open to the interrogation of the role of research assistants in the research process and potential influences they may have on the quality and integrity of data collected, in general this is a topic that remains underexplored. The literature on research assistants in qualitative primary research is conspicuous in its absence from most social science qualitative research handbooks (e.g. Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; Flick, 2009; Silverman, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), with a few exceptions such as Devereux and Hoddinott (1992) and Liamputtong (2010, 2013). Therefore, researchers have very little practical guidance on how to find, recruit, train and work with research assistants, and the range of associated ethical, conceptual and theoretical issues that this entails. Further, graduate methodological training frequently overlooks this issue, and as Middleton and Cons (2014, p. 282) note, “for even the most established scholars, the subject of research assistants can make for uncomfortable conversation”.

Drawing on the thin but growing body of work on this issue, as well as our own experiences of conducting fieldwork in a low-income and cross-cultural setting, in this chapter we set out the practical steps researchers go through when they plan their fieldwork and work with research assistants. We show how these practical considerations are intertwined with the power asymmetries rooted in the employment relation between researcher and research assistant. We also explore how the triangular power dynamics between research participants, research assistants, and researchers influence and shape the research process and outcomes, as well as how these power dynamics reflect the broader institutional research landscape and the political economy of research more generally, in which questions of power, ownership and extraction are prominent.

Whilst all research projects that require the employment of research assistants will face common challenges, it is also clear that the role and influence of research assistants will also be shaped by the specificities of each project. Without a concrete set of guidelines that can be mechanically followed, in this chapter we provide a number of examples designed to illustrate how these issues have been considered by different researchers. We hope that this chapter will aid researchers at all levels of experience in the fieldwork process, as well as to stimulate much-needed further discussion and exploration of the role of research assistants.

2 Research assistants: Necessary to the research process?

2.1 Who is the research assistant?

Working as a research assistant may refer to a variety of roles and associated tasks, depending on the context in which the job is performed. Research assistants in academic and non-academic institutions are often employed by more senior colleagues to carry out desk-based tasks such as background literature searches, annotated bibliographies, and the like (Molony & Hammett, 2007). In this area of research, research assistants locate, read and review *secondary* literature and data.

A rather different role is performed by research assistants who facilitate processes of *primary* data collection. First, the implementation of large-scale surveys relies on the work of interviewers or enumerators who are normally recruited locally, where the survey is to take place, and trained by experienced researchers. As large-scale surveys are the most widely used instrument for the generation of data on household welfare, poverty, health, employment and so forth, there is some material on training enumerators (Grosh & Glewwe, 2000; Iarossi, 2006). Most manuals for the implementation of large-scale surveys contain guidance and procedures on the recruitment, training and supervision of enumerators and instructions on how to ask questions and fill out the questionnaires (see IFC Macro, 2009 for an example of this in relation to the implementation of Demographic Health Surveys). Nonetheless, the literature concerned with understanding the *power* of interviewers/enumerators in shaping the process of quantitative data collection as well as its outcomes remains very limited (Randall et al., 2003; Flores-Macias & Lawson, 2008).

Second, research assistants can be interpreters. Interpreters provide translation in the course of research activities and are needed in all cases when researchers are not fluent in the language spoken by the participants. There is some literature on interpreters mostly reflecting on how to make translation work in order to collect meaningful data (Temple & Edwards, 2002; Temple & Young, 2004; Bujra, 2006; Liamputtong, 2010) and, even thinner material on the relative benefits of different interpreting techniques (Williamson et al., 2011; MacKenzie, 2016). However, some argue that the role of interpreters is rarely explored in the literature as the researcher claims and maintains full ownership of the research process and outcome (Berman & Tyyskä, 2015).

Third, research assistants facilitate and mediate data collection in qualitative research, which is the focus of this chapter. Many researchers conducting qualitative research in a variety of disciplines, ranging from anthropology to political economy, rely on research assistants to carry out their fieldwork. Whilst initially regarded as interpreters and 'conduits' in the research process (Freed, 1998), this view has been abandoned thus enabling the expanded role that research assistants in reality play, especially in cross-cultural settings, to be acknowledged. Research assistants tend to be familiar with the context and local language(s) where research takes place, and accompany the researcher through interviews and other research activities, either leading the activities themselves or assisting the leading researcher (Deane & Stevano, 2015). Research assistants may contribute to the design of research activities prior to their implementation, through informing the selection of research site(s) and participants, as well as the type, structure and content of interviews or other activities such as focus groups or participant observation (Deane & Stevano, 2015). A research assistant also takes part in the ongoing analysis of the material collected through regular discussions with the researcher, an important but often unacknowledged form of informal analysis, giving researchers the space and opportunity to think through and articulate emerging themes and narratives. This expanded role of the research assistant, therefore requires a more detailed understanding of how they influence data collection activities and the quality of data collected.

2.2 How to assess when research assistants are needed

When planning their fieldwork, one of the first decisions researchers are to take is whether they will need the support of one or more research assistants. The most immediate aspect that ought to be considered in this respect is the degree of knowledge, familiarity and insiderness the researcher has with the studied context, and whether working with a research assistant can facilitate the process of data collection. We suggest a set of key guiding questions that can help researchers making this assessment.

First, the most important questions revolve around the position of the researcher vis-à-vis the research participants. If the researcher is, or is perceived to be, an outsider in the setting where research takes place, then a research assistant with a greater degree of insiderness can help bridge important gaps. These can include the researcher's lack of institutional contacts as well as her or his limited ability to verify the accuracy of the information collected, linguistic and cultural barriers, and respondents' uneasiness to speak to an outsider (Liamputtong, 2010). It is, however, important to consider that being an outsider has advantages too and researchers may find that in some contexts respondents are more comfortable giving information to an outsider. For example, in a study that explored women's understandings and experiences of cervical cancer screening in the UK involving many participants who were from different ethnic and religious backgrounds, it was found that by emphasizing their status as an outsider and the lack of knowledge they had about the participants' cultural and religious backgrounds, the researcher managed to elicit detailed accounts. In part, this was due to the empowerment of participants as 'experts' vis-a-vis the researcher (Tinker & Armstrong, 2008). At the center of these questions lie the relations of power between researcher, researched and research assistant, which will be discussed below. This goes to show the importance of reflecting on these three-fold dynamics matters right from the beginning of any process of fieldwork planning.

Second, there are some practical questions relating to the research timeframe and funding. Depending on the desired sample size and number of interviews, working with a research assistant can produce some time gains when researcher and research assistant conduct research activities separately and in parallel, or when more than one research assistant can be employed. If the sample size is medium to large, given the available time, then sharing the workload with a research assistant may be an advantage. Likewise, if the researcher plans to conduct a high number of interviews in a given amount of time, then working with a research assistant can help reach the target. However, these benefits do not apply to cases where researcher and research assistant conduct research activities jointly, if translation is constantly needed for example, or where the research assistant leads the implementation of the research activity by herself/himself (Deane & Stevano, 2015).

Another critical practical point has to do with funds available to remunerate the work of research assistants. As we discuss below, the relation with research assistants is first and foremost one of employment (Molony & Hammett, 2007; Deane & Stevano, 2015), therefore, the availability of adequate funds is necessary to employ a research assistant. The duration of employment as well as the tasks that the research assistant will be responsible for may well depend on the available funding. This is important both in the context of large research projects, where budgets need to cost research assistance appropriately, and in doctoral and other smaller research projects, where researchers are subject to tight financial constraints. Although these practical considerations are often neglected in the literature, they do shape the nature of research projects, their objectives, and the associated involvement of research assistants. To find out what is feasible with the available funds, it is advisable to investigate the ongoing hourly, daily, or monthly rates for research assistants in the context where research is to take place.

Third, there are issues that relate more specifically with the scope of each research project. A general guide on how to make a decision on whether a research assistant is needed is provided by the exercise of linking research questions to research methods. We break down the overarching research question into several sub-questions, and then we consider the best equipped method to address each research question.[1] For each research question and associated method, we reflect on the role a research assistant can play. What is the role of a research assistant if we plan to use participant observation to study intra-household decision-making among poor households? What is the role of the assistant if we plan to conduct interviews with farmers, NGO workers, or government officials? When participant observation is used in contexts where the researcher is not fluent in the participants' language, the presence of the research assistant is necessary for the entire duration of the research activities. However, there are good reasons why, in some cases, it may be appropriate that research assistants lead the research activities This may be due to the nature of the topics at hand, or with the respondents' ease to speak to the research assistant, rather than to the researcher,

[1] We both have Deborah Johnston to thank for this approach.

or better understand their accent. For example, during a qualitative study conducted in Tanzania on the relationship between population mobility and HIV risk (Deane et al., 2016), it was decided that in-depth interviews with participants that covered sensitive topics such as sexual behavior were to be led by the research assistants alone, in part to create a more conducive and safe environment for participants, as well to address the distorting presence that an observing lead researcher (who was not fluent in the local language), would have on the interview dynamic.

While there are no uniform answers to these questions, these are important issues that need to be carefully considered when planning field research. It is clear that the role of the research assistant is nested within broader historical and political processes underlying the nature of research, its time line, and the availability of research funding as well as the power asymmetries between researcher and participants. Researchers can follow key guiding questions to make decisions on whether they should work with one or more research assistants but, crucially, they must consider how the practicalities do not transcend from the web of power relations operating at both the individual and the institutional level, which we discuss below.

3 Working with research assistants

3.1 An employment relation: Recruiting research assistants

As Molony and Hammet (2007) note, the relation between researcher and research assistant is shaped by a range of wealth and power asymmetries that are rooted in a broader set of international historical relations, but it is essentially one of employment. The researcher-employer needs to recruit a research assistant, establish a work relation, and manage it.

Once it is established that one or more research assistants are needed to carry out primary data collection, then researchers need to find suitable candidates for the job. For some researchers, it may be the first time they act as employers, therefore the process of finding research assistants, even more so in contexts that may be unfamiliar, should not be taken for granted. A number of practical routes can be taken. First, some attempts can be made prior to travelling to the research site. It may be useful to use research networks and connect with other researchers who have conducted research in the same settings as they may have contacts of research assistants they directly work with, or have worked with in the past.

Second, it would be highly advisable to establish an affiliation with a local research institute. These collaborations are crucial not only as channels to find research assistants (Molony & Hammett, 2007), but also to get to know the local research environment, meet other researchers, and eventually disseminate findings where they are closer to the realities they describe. Further, partnerships with local research institutes are strongly encouraged by funding institutions, representing one positive, if often tokenistic, aspect of the current politics of research funding.

If collaborations with local research institutes are not possible and other attempts were unsuccessful, local university students may be willing to take up part-time jobs as research assistants. Students may be reached through teachers or announcements on the university campuses. Finally, it is also possible that the nature of research is such that the *best* research assistant is someone who is very familiar with the context, despite lacking connection with research, studies or previous research assistance experience. This may be the situation of researchers working in remote areas, on sensitive topics, or in unsecure settings (Jenkins, 2015). In these cases, building personal networks and using word of mouth may be the most effective ways to find suitable assistants.

In a formalized recruitment process, the researcher holds interviews and selects from a pool of candidates. What are the criteria to select a research assistant? The decision, as Molony and Hammett (2007, p. 295) suggest, entails considering a number of factors:

> The selection of a research assistant is a key decision, where one must balance the academic qualifications with the experience and personality of the potential assistant in relation to the physical and social environment(s) in which the research is to be conducted.

Some have suggested that matching research assistants and research participants on a number of socio-demographic characteristics (Temple & Edwards, 2002) is a viable selection technique. This would entail considering language, age, gender, education, socio-economic status and residence location. For example, the research assistant needs to be fluent in the language(s) spoken by research participants. However, it becomes immediately clear that the usefulness of the matching exercise is limited, unless it is complemented with a broader assessment of the triangular power relations between researcher, research assistant and research participants (Deane & Stevano, 2015). Consider a research project focussed on women: it would seem appropriate to employ a woman as a research assistant. However, in many settings it is necessary to negotiate with male gatekeepers to gain access to women, which makes it possible that male research assistants may be better placed to navigate this process (Mandel, 2003; Deane & Stevano, 2015). Further, insights can be gained from research assistants themselves. In a reflective article in which Turner (2010) interviewed two former female research assistants on their experiences of the research process in Vietnam and China, both research assistants noted that they found men easier to interview than women, in part because the cross-gender dynamic created space for the development of strategies to deal with this, and also because within those contexts, it was more culturally acceptable for men to talk and share information, whilst women often deferred to their husbands and so interviews with them were often difficult. As Turner (2010, p. 212) notes, this is a surprising dynamic that contradicts perceived wisdom, as it is often assumed that “female assistants will be more comfortable interviewing females; likewise male assistants interviewing men”.

A related concern is the ethnicity of research assistants, and how this may influence the research process. Whilst it is common in cross-cultural settings to hire research assistants who have a similar cultural background to participants, often for linguistic reasons, this can blur the insider/outsider status of the researcher, and influence the research process through the ways that research assistants have to mediate cultural norms, expectations and structures. Ensuring that the influence that the ethnicity of the research assistant has on the research process is at least acknowledged, if not considered from the outset, is of vital importance. For example, in research conducted in the Mozambican province of Cabo Delgado (Stevano, 2014), inhabited by three main ethnic groups – Macua, Maconde and Mwani – the research assistant, a Maconde, was more of an insider with Maconde respondents and less so with Macua and Mwani interviewees.

A final dimension when trying to recruit the most suitable research assistant in cross-cultural qualitative research relates to the methodological expertise of the prospective research assistants. This can be a challenge in some settings, as due to the predominance of large-scale surveys as instruments for primary data collection, research assistants may have had prior experience of conducting structured interviews, but not of more complex qualitative approaches, leading to difficulties in recruiting appropriately experienced research assistants (Molyneaux et al., 2009). In this case, time must be taken to ensure that the prospective research assistant, especially if they have previously worked with questionnaire-based interviews, is informed and trained on the range of qualitative methods that will be used. The importance of recruiting research assistants who have experience and knowledge of qualitative methods is reflected in the influence that this may have on the research design itself. For example, in the Tanzanian study noted above, the research assistants’ lack of experience with qualitative methods required a change in approach, with the planned life-history approach replaced with more straightforward semi-structured in-depth interviews. Whilst this certainly influenced the research process, it highlights the ways in which researchers have to respond to the capabilities and experience of their research assistants during the fieldwork process.

Of course, it is entirely acceptable that the recruitment process is less formalized, especially when there is only one candidate, or time constraints are such that finding one suitable research assistant is preferred to selecting from a group. Nonetheless, even in informal recruitment processes, it is crucial to take into consideration power relations along the lines of gender, class, ethnicity, age, and so forth, as well as other requirements such as degree of insiderness, previous experience working as a research assistant and commitment to the role. The absence of deterministic answers to these questions does not make them irrelevant. Reasoning on these issues requires weighing up the relative importance of each factor in the context of specific research projects, and this will lead to the best empirical choices under the given circumstances and constraints.

The labor relation highlights the responsibility of the *employer* to ensure that *employees* enjoy fair working conditions and conduct the research activities to the required academic and ethical standard. A central component of establishing a fair employment relation lies in clear contractual arrangements and adequate pay, issues that are discussed in detail by Molony and Hammett (2007). Research assistants may be paid directly by the researcher or by the research institute through which they are employed. Depending on the payment channels used, the labor relation between research and research assistant will be more or less explicit (Deane & Stevano, 2015). Either way, it is crucial that the employment offer is decent and provides very clear indication of tasks, payment structure, and duration of employment. An agreement on each of these issues should be sought prior to the beginning of the job. However, this financial relationship is not always easily managed, due to the existence of an often significant wealth asymmetry between researcher and research assistant (Molony & Hammett, 2007), and also because the role that research assistants fulfil are multiple, overlapping, fluid and susceptible to change, and thus, not always easy to pre-define upfront. Further, as the relationship between researcher and research assistant develops due to the time spent together and the blurred boundary between employer and friend, the integration of the researcher into the personal network of the research assistant can lead to situations in which researchers are expected to help out financially in times of need beyond paying the agreed wage. And in some situations, research assistants, aware of the wealth asymmetries, may attempt to extract as much money as possible from the researcher (Molony & Hammet, 2007). There are also other smaller financial issues to deal with, such as setting and managing expectations in terms of who pays for soda/tea or lunch during extended periods in the field. Managing these financial arrangements is thus not always an easy task, involving both obligational and philanthropic urges and the need to maintain the relationship as a contractual, business arrangement (Molony & Hammet, 2007).

The duration of employment should reflect the time necessary for training, before the start of the research activities and also while data collection takes place. Training is critical to make sure that the research assistant can perform her/his role to the highest scientific and ethical standards. As noted above, there is some literature on training enumerators who conduct large-scale surveys. However, there is a gap in the literature on training of research assistants in qualitative social science research. Molyneux et al. (2009) make a strong case for placing training at the outset of the methodology in multi-method research. A number of activities can be carried out during the training sessions. It is necessary to explain the rationale and objectives of the research project as well as the scope of each research activity. What is the expected outcome of each research activity and what is the best way to obtain it? The research assistant can take up an active role in shaping the format and content of research activities, based on their knowledge of the context. This process can carry on for the entire duration of data collection as qualitative research is not subject to the fixity of questionnaires. Constant revision and adaptation of qualitative interviews is arguably one of the strengths of qualitative research, and the research assistant can play an important role in this process.

It has been argued that the employment relation between researcher and research assistant is multifaceted because the research assistant is also a friend and a companion (Turner, 2010), on the one hand, and because there are other power asymmetries that mark the labour relation, on the other hand (Molony & Hammett, 2007). Here we draw attention on the risks that research assistants may be exposed to due to their position of insiders in relation to participants and their communities.[2] While research assistants are employees, they also guide the researcher through the process of data collection, facilitating interactions with authorities, building trust with participants and their communities, *de facto* leading the process through which researchers gain access to informants and, eventually, data. Thus, Jenkins (2015) notes, when the trust-building process is compromised – often due to factors that are beyond the control of research assistant and researcher, such as ethnic divides and any event that creates unjustified suspicion in the researched communities – assistants are exposed to risks. Cramer et al. (2016) reflect on a challenging episode when research assistants were detained by local security officials for having held interviews with farmworkers at their homes without a permission from their employers, thus highlighting the risks of operating within networks of structures of power based. In this case, on ties between farm owners and local officials. Researchers may lose access to research communities but research assistants, as people who live in the research context, may face risks that carry beyond the duration of the data collection process. Thus, it is the researcher's responsibility to try to anticipate and minimiZe a variety of risks that may emerge during the research process.

In sum, the recruitment of research assistants requires a degree of professionality, transparency, and trust on the part of the researcher, who acts primarily as an employer. There are, however, a set of economic, political, and ethical issues we, as researchers, need to consider to establish a fair working relation with the research assistant. These include, quite obviously, adequate pay and working conditions, clear agreement on what the job entails and high-quality training, but also an open assessment of the potential risks and ways to minimiZe them.

3.2 Research assistants' tasks

So far we have described the decision-making process researchers go through, from deciding if they need to work with a research assistant to employing one, but what will the research assistant eventually do? In this section, we discuss a set of tasks research assistants may be asked to perform before, during and after fieldwork.

When funding allows it, it is advisable that the researcher arranges a scoping research trip to recruit an assistant and carry out the preliminary work to then run the research activities smoothly. Setting the scene includes establishing contacts with governmental and non-governmental institutions and obtaining permission to carry out research, when needed. Research assistants may provide valuable contributions in the preliminary phases of fieldwork, by facilitating contacts with local institutions, authorities and key informants. For example, in our recent fieldwork on food consumption among schoolchildren in Accra, Ghana, the research assistant managed the communication with the Accra

[2] As described by Cramer et al. (2016), we recognize that researchers are also exposed to risks when conducting primary research but, due to the objectives of this chapter, we focus on the risks potentially facing research assistants.

Metro Education Office to obtain an updated list of private and public schools and then permission to conduct interviews in a sample of schools. These networks of contacts and paperwork are a crucial step to ensure access to research participants and their communities. They also represent a first move toward building trust between the research assistant and the respondents, thus possibly making the subsequent research activities more welcome.

To then consider the variety of tasks research assistants can perform during the implementation of research activities, it is useful to go back to the exercise of matching questions, methods and role of research assistant described in section 2.2. Depending on a number of factors, the research assistant may only translate, assist the researcher, co-lead interviews or take up full leadership, in either absence of presence of the researcher. Practically, the basic decision that needs to be taken is on who leads the activities. As mentioned above, there are different criteria that can be used. First, it depends on the research method used. For example, in focus groups or other collective interviews it may be useful that the researcher and the assistant perform different tasks, with one leading the interview and the other one taking notes. Second, the nature of the topic at hand matters. Sensitive topics may be handled better by local researchers. But, at the same time, it is worth considering the possible risks arising for the assistants, especially if they have a more visible leadership role. Third, considerations on the preference of respondents to speak to an insider or to an outsider may lead the researcher to decide that the research assistant leads the interviews, and vice versa. Different configurations have implications on the methods used, the ability to go 'off-script' and follow up on interesting themes that emerge in the course of the interviews, and on the research flow, with simultaneous translation making activities longer and more tiring (Deane & Stevano, 2015). For example, during a study in Bangladesh that aimed to investigate women's experiences of emergency obstetric care, Pitchforth and van Teijlingen (2005) encountered challenges related to the flow of interviews when conducted with their research assistant as a translator. Not only did this make the interviews time consuming and disjointed due to the constant flow of information from researcher to research assistant to participant and back again, they also noted that the research assistant did not always interpret some questions or comments, or did not want to ask specific questions that seemed obvious to them. Reflecting on this issue, they came up with an alternative approach in which the research assistant led the interview, and at key points during the interview summarized the conversation and gave the researcher the opportunity to input additional questions or lines of inquiry. This enabled the interviews to work more like a structured conversation and improved the flow, but required the researcher to cede control of the interviews to the research assistant (Pitchforth & van Teijlingen, 2005). The cessation of control to research assistants was even more evident in the project conducted in Tanzania mentioned above. In this project, the researcher was not even present, and thus was completely reliant on the research assistants to ask the right questions and follow up on anything unexpected that arose (Deane & Stevano, 2015). The exact configuration will have an impact of the depth of training and preparation required before research activities commence, as well as further muddying the already complex power dynamic between researcher and research assistant.

Importantly, research assistants participate in the on-going analysis of data collected. This can be done as regular informal conversations or more structured debriefs at the end of each research activity. More structured check-ups may be needed when research assistants lead the interviews (Molyneux et al., 2009; Deane & Stevano, 2015). Different techniques have implications for the quantity and quality of data collected (Deane & Stevano, 2015). For the purpose of planning, it is important to put time aside for the on-going data analyses. As much as it may look like a trivial observation, it is, on the contrary, meaningful in a scenario where conducting interviews tends to be given priority over reflecting on the material collected. It is time consuming to take notes on a regular basis and often what is not written will then be forgotten and lost later on.

Finally, in the post-fieldwork phase, the research assistant may still have a role to play. First, the researcher may decide to ask the assistant to read and comment on field reports, as an extension of the interim analyses described above. Second, joint publications can also be considered. This depends on the willingness of the research assistant to participate in writing up research. Research assistants who work for research institutes may have an interest in appearing as co-authors of research articles. However, researchers are also constrained by the boundaries of disciplinary practice. In some disciplines, such as medical science, nutrition sciences and public health, researchers are expected to list as co-authors all people involved in the research process, including research assistants. Yet other disciplines, such as economics, anthropology, development studies, normally include only the writing authors, and, additionally, researchers in these disciplines are encouraged to have solo-authored publications. It is more common in these disciplines to recognize the work of research assistants in the acknowledgements.

Research assistants' work is precious throughout field research. It is, therefore, important that researchers consider carefully how to manage the assistant's involvement, and acknowledge their contributions, not only to do justice to their work, but also to reflect on the influence research assistants have on the shape of the research process and on the quality of the output.

4 Conceptual and ethical issues

By tracing the decision-making process researchers go through to recruit and work with assistants, it becomes evident that most practical decisions are intertwined with the web of power relations governing the interaction between researcher, research assistant, and participants. Previous work, especially by anthropologists and feminist scholars, has reflected on the positionality of researcher and researched and the need for a reflexive approach to research (Harding, 1987; England, 1994; Pack, 2006). Some have extended these reflections to include the research assistant as a third important actor (Temple & Edwards, 2002). These approaches stress the subjective nature of these relations, thus focussing on the 'values', 'beliefs', 'assumptions' that each actor – the researcher, the research assistant, the researched – bring in the research process, creating a 'triple subjectivity' (Temple & Edwards, 2002, p. 11). As much as the inclusion of the research assistant in the picture is of paramount importance for thorough reflections on research methodology, the emphasis on subjectivities falls short of considering the materiality of these relations of power. We need to understand how the distribution of power along the lines of age, gender, nationality, class, race comes to shape the interactions between the people involved in the research process and how, in turn, research itself is shaped by them. And thus, we extend this analysis to include a consideration of the objective relations between researcher, research assistant and participants, that overlap with but are distinct from the triple subjectivities noted above (Deane & Stevano, 2015).

The objective relations between research assistant and participant, and how these shape the research process and outcomes are also important to consider. For instance, in the Tanzanian example, research assistants were frequently interviewing participants that were older, thus conferring a certain power dynamic, which was offset by other aspects, such as the fact that the research assistants were more educated. In other settings, it may be the ethnicity or the social class of research assistants vis-à-vis participants that matter. How these different dynamics play out in the research process is often difficult to disentangle, but they must be acknowledged. The relations between researcher and participant are also mediated by the research assistant, whether the researcher is present or not, and thus presents an extra layer of complexity when considering the role of research assistants. Whether these influences are addressed up front, or reflected on during and after fieldwork activities, it is undeniable that they will impact the outcomes of the project.

Acknowledging that the researcher-research assistant relation is one of employment highlights fundamental material conditions of the relation, such as payment, contractual arrangements and the responsibilities of both employer and employee. It also raises the issue of research ownership. For, as much as research assistants perform well at their job and contribute to the quality of research, the official ownership of research remains ultimately in the hands of the researcher-employer. This can have implications for how the research project is run, how and why some conflicts of interest arise, and may also help researchers understand the underlying dynamics of difficult relationships with research assistants – is your research assistant just being difficult because that is the way they are, or because of these broader dynamics? As Molony and Hammett (2007) note, the relationship between researcher and research assistant brings into sharp focus the extractive nature of cross-cultural research, especially in low-income settings, and the unequal benefits that different parties derive from the process.

The question of ownership helps us see how the power dynamics we experience as researchers conducting fieldwork are nested in institutional relations, which set the boundaries within which we do research. So far we have discussed the decisions, and the underlying power dynamics, we face as individual researchers. From this angle, the practice of silencing the research assistant is considered to be harmful because it does not acknowledge the invaluable work of assistants and their influence over the research process and output (Molony & Hammett, 2007; Turner, 2010; Caretta, 2015; Deane & Stevano, 2015; Jenkins, 2015). As Jenkins (2015, p. 24) notes, "silencing the research assistant not only does a disservice to the extent of their influence over our research—in both its positive and negative manifestations—but it also prevents an honest, open, and fundamentally important discussion of how we can collaborate with these figures in a more ethical manner". However, the extent to which we can improve the ethical terms upon which we work with research assistants fundamentally depends on how research institutions and funding bodies govern the relations with partners in lower income countries.

Given the centrality of North-South research partnerships, especially in the fields of development and global health research (Bradley, 2006; Murphy et al., 2015; Spiegel et al., 2015), it is essential to contextualize the experience of individual researchers within the broader picture. Although a discussion on the nature and implications of these partnership is beyond the scope of this chapter, we want to underline the importance of the structural inequalities embedded in these collaborations in shaping the work relation between researcher and research assistant. As Bradley (2006, p. 15) notes, "this asymmetry [between northern and southern partners] manifests itself in the form of inequitable access to information, training, funding, conferences, publishing opportunities, and disproportionate influence of Northern partners in decision-making on the research agenda, project administration and budget management". A more equitable engagement of research assistants is critically constrained by these asymmetries, in that ownership of research remains in the hands of the researcher, acting on behalf of their institution. Thus, there are ways, as described above, in which researchers can make the employment relation with their assistant fairer in terms of pay and working conditions. But, reflecting and writing about the role of research assistants does not resolve all ethical issues, many of which should rather be dealt with at the institutional level.

5 Conclusions and Future Directions

Researchers conducting qualitative social science research do not have much guidance on how to make decisions to find, recruit and work with research assistants. This chapter is important because it is an initial attempt to fulfil some of these gaps. Drawing on our own research as well as that of others, we have discussed a set of key practical considerations researchers need to address when planning their fieldwork – from assessing whether a research assistant is needed to managing a work relation with assistants. The intention of the exercise was not to provide uniform answers, but rather to identify key issues and reasoning to address them. Whilst their impact on the overall research process will not always be known, an awareness of how research assistants can influence the quality of data collected, as well as the final analysis, will improve the data collection process.

It is evident that the practicalities of working with research assistants are entrenched with the power relations that shape interactions between researchers, research assistants, and participants. The central relation we discussed is that between the researcher and the research assistant, which leads to considering a set of key responsibilities and obligations the researcher has as the employer. Thus managing the relation with the assistant requires thinking about a series of practical issues, such as adequate training, adequate pay, fair working conditions and clear contractual arrangements. But, crucially, it is based on understanding the essential character of the relationship as one of employment. Researchers need to be more explicit in their acknowledgement of the work of research assistant, and also need to reflect more on the influence they have on the research process and outcomes. However, there are important ethical concerns, stemming from the structurally unequal relations between partner institutions, that will not be resolved by individual researchers, or in the context of specific research projects.

Future contributions on this topic are much needed to fulfil a crucial gap in the literature on research methodology. Practical guidance for researchers would be significantly enriched if researchers doing cross-cultural research in the area of social science reflected, discussed and wrote more on this topic. In particular, it would be useful to know more about different ways in which research assistants are employed by researchers, and the type of assistance they provide in different contexts. At the same time, contributions exploring the institutional determinants of the habitual silence on the role of research assistant would be critical to help us see this issue within the bigger picture, and reflect on what is needed to make the research landscape more conducive to fair collaborations between North and South institutions.

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