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## **Afterword**

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### **Introduction**

It is a great pleasure to write this afterword to a collection of thought-provoking chapters which demonstrate the vibrancy of geographical research in the Global South by scholars based in Northern institutions, and the insights revealed when reflecting on the research process itself. Nearly twenty years ago when Elsbeth Robson and I were doctoral students in Oxford, conducting research in Nigeria and Mexico respectively, we were the PhD student representatives on the Developing Areas Research Group (DARG) Committee. From our own experiences and discussions with other Geography PhD students at UK universities conducting research in the Global South, we felt that there was a need for students to share their experiences of field research to demonstrate the messiness of research reality, often at odds with the accounts presented in research papers or research methods publications. This led us to convene a session at the 1994 Institute of British Geographers (as it was then) Conference. Contributions to this session were edited into a DARG Monograph (Robson and Willis, 1994), which was revised and expanded into a second edition (Robson and Willis, 1997).

Elsbeth and I were both strongly influenced by feminist debates regarding positionality and the exercise of power within the research process (see, for example, Harding, 1987; Stacey, 1988; McDowell, 1992). In the early 1990s these debates were key elements of the emerging

field of feminist geography, and there was also a growing engagement with arguments coming out of postcolonial theory around Northern researchers conducting fieldwork in the Global South (see, for example, Sidaway, 1992; Madge, 1993). What the chapters in the current volume reveal is that discussions about the researcher's position and the politics and ethics of research have become embedded in how many geographers approach their research. As I highlight later, what is particularly welcome is how assumptions about how power works in research have been problematised, so it is not a simple matter of looking at different dimensions of identity and 'reading off' how these will play out in research practice. There are, however, continuing challenges as to how issues of power and positionality are discussed, both in PhD theses and in publications. They usually appear in the methodology chapter/ section, and while this is an eminently practical choice, it can lead to an impression that these issues are not part of analysis and writing.

The contained and regimented approach to research politics and ethics is very clearly seen in institutional approaches to ethical approval. A major change in UK university policy since I was a PhD student is how ethical approval has extended from the medical schools, to other faculties. This has been driven both by internal decisions within universities, but also the requirements of funding bodies, such as the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). While research approval in the social sciences has long been a part of North American university life through the institutional review board system, this shift within the UK has been very noticeable, although the requirements still vary a great deal between institutions (Blake, 2007).

I would argue that making research ethics procedures a compulsory part of conducting research is welcome, but the challenge is what mechanisms to use. As Sarah Dyer and David

Demeritt state in their critique of how medical ethics procedures have been implemented in social sciences, 'Ethical review is designed to pre-empt complaint by imposing a system of external accountability' (2009, p.48). A number of authors in this volume have also highlighted the problems with the institutional tendency to have a rigid 'tick-box' system, where ethical approval is seen as a one-off process, conducted without the input of research participants, or a recognition of the fluid and contingent nature of ethics . However, at the other extreme is perhaps the impossible position of the researcher as an 'ethical super-human' as Thomas Aneurin Smith states in his chapter.

The chapters in this book demonstrate the diverse ways in which doctoral researchers have negotiated this ethical path and their reflections on the decisions that they made, sometimes without realising it at the time. A particular feature of much geographical research in the Global South, and one which all contributors to this book share, is a commitment to 'making the world better'. In some cases, this is an explicit attempt to link activism and academic research, but in others it is through collaboration with local partners or the sharing of results with policy-makers or civil society organisations (see Chopra, Jones and Staddon, this volume). This broader ethical commitment frames the choice of research topic, but also the way in which it is conducted.

In the rest of the afterword I want to discuss these themes in more detail. In particular, I will reflect on research as a social process and consider the politics of research not just for those directly involved, but also for those indirectly implicated or affected. Then I will move on to examine the ongoing and open-ended nature of research ethics, concluding with a discussion of recent debates on participatory ethics.

## **Research as a social process**

Simplistic assumptions that researchers from the Global North working in the Global South will always 'hold the upper hand' in terms of power in the research process have been increasingly challenged, and as many chapters in this book demonstrate, as a PhD student you often feel that you are at the mercy of other people's willingness to participate or grant access to communities, field sites or documents (see also Sultana, 2007). This is a common issue in all research, regardless of career stage; in my own experience during research on women's work in low- and middle-income households in urban Mexico (see, for example, Willis 2000) as a PhD student I had numerous situations where women refused to participate, or where they agreed to participate their responses to my questions were monosyllabic or very vague. As a more experienced researcher looking at gender and identity issues among Singaporean highly-skilled migrants to China (see, for example, Willis and Yeoh, 1999), there were similar challenges, leading to frustrations on my part. However, just because there is no simplistic North-South power dynamic in research does not mean that this is an issue which is no longer worthy of consideration.

Linked to particular constructions of the Global South 'Other' has been an often implicit assumption that low-income research participants will share the perspectives of outside researchers, particularly when there is commitment to 'progressive change'. Associated with this may be a belief that any tensions in the research process, or negative emotions are the result of failings on the part of the researcher. However, as Thomas Aneurin Smith also highlights in his chapter, assumptions of 'moral and ethical alignment with the researched' are sometimes unfounded. Rather than making homogenising and potentially patronising assumptions about research participants, it is important that the context, the topic and the

individuals concerned are considered, and that researchers recognise that as with all social interactions, there are people that we 'click' with more than others. It is also legitimate to feel animosity towards individuals, but whether or how this is expressed is a different question. I have reflected on the role of anger in fieldwork and potential reasons for its exclusion from many fieldwork accounts (Willis, 2010; see also Briggs, 1970). Claudia Hanson Thiem and Morgan Robertson (2010) discuss a similar need to recognise the nature of social interactions with individuals in particular contexts in their edited set of papers on conducting oppositional research. The papers in this themed issue of *Geoforum* challenge the monolithic interpretation of internally homogenous institutions such as the World Bank, and the need to engage with the diverse personalities and politics of individuals within them.

A focus on responsibilities towards research participants within ethics discussions usually fails to engage with the implications for non-participants. This may be of particular importance when participation includes potential benefits such as financial recompense or access to information or social networks which could provide advantages in the future. Debates about the ethics of payment for participation are wide-ranging (see, for example Fergolm, Day and Wang chapters in this volume), but as Dan Hamnett and Deborah Sporton (2012) argue, one aspect which is often excluded is the ethical responsibility of researchers towards non-participants. Sam Staddon in her chapter on Nepal, does recognise the need for other community members to 'take up the slack' when participants are involved in the research, so their contribution should be recognised. For Hamnett and Sporton, the decision to provide financial support for community facilities in the Kenyan villages where they run undergraduate and postgraduate fieldtrips was based on a desire to thank all community members. The decision was made following discussions with local community leaders and field centre staff, but led to tensions with some researcher participants and also local guides

and translators. This tension was not only because it was a change in approach from previous years, but that other visiting student groups were continuing to give individual participants a small token of gratitude (such as a bar of soap or bag of sugar) for their involvement. This highlights how research practices and their ethical underpinnings are also implicated in wider networks of academic research, and also potentially set up expectations for future researchers (see also Kuyunanon Knapp on implications for future researchers based on her experiences in Bhutan).

One dimension of social relations which rarely comes out in the literature, but which is very apparent from personal experiences and emerges from some of the chapters in this volume, is the relations with our loved ones, whether they accompany us on fieldwork or not (Le Masson, this volume; Lunn and Moscuza, this volume). The need to acknowledge the fluidity of the boundary between researchers' lives 'at work' and 'outside work' has been an important theme of feminist research. In most of the discussions of research ethics the focus is on the research participants and the need to 'minimise harm' for them. However, in our lives beyond our narrow identities as 'researchers' we are partners, spouses, parents, children, siblings etc. with affective and material ties with family members who may be affected by our research, particularly if there are long periods of absence overseas. It was only in hindsight that I realised the worry that my PhD fieldwork in Mexico had generated for my family. This was in the days before mobile phones and the internet, so communication relied on the postal system and infrequent phone calls from public phones. Even with greater connectivity which new technology provides those with appropriate resources in many parts of the world, the potential emotional impacts of overseas fieldwork on family members should be recognised. This certainly does not mean that researchers should never set foot

outside their front door, but that thinking about how and when you keep in touch with loved ones 'at home' during your fieldwork is an important and legitimate topic.

Additionally, the impacts on the researcher of conducting research are also rarely considered.

While some institutional ethics forms including mention of the likelihood of the research resulting in 'physical or psychological distress or discomfort', this is not usually an issue which is debated or prioritised, given the focus of ethics procedures on participants.

Researcher health is usually covered, at least in the UK context, through the risk assessment process linked to health and safety legislation (see Tomei, this volume). Research is always going to have stressful and difficult elements; these may be related to academic concerns, research logistics or broader material or emotional aspects. The accounts in this volume are highly informative in providing insights into the concerns and frustrations which fieldwork can engender. While for most researchers, including doctoral researchers, periods of overseas fieldwork are often life-changing in a positive way, this is not the case for everyone, and even those for whom the experience was positive, there can be difficulties. These may relate to loneliness or physical illness, or distressing research encounters, particularly if dealing with challenging topics such as domestic violence, child mortality and HIV/AIDS. It is important that researchers are given appropriate support, including counselling support if suitable, when dealing with such issues. The ethics of care relate not only to research participants and those indirectly affected by our research, but also to ourselves.

This section reflected on debates around positionality and highlighted how simplistic assumptions about power in research encounters need to be challenged as many contributors to this volume have done. Additionally, it has stressed how non-participants can be implicated in research and the ethical dimensions of these relationships. The aim was not to

provide a yet larger burden of ethical dilemmas with which researchers have to engage, but rather to make visible elements of research practice which are often ignored.

### **Ethical research as an ongoing process**

Gill Valentine, in her discussion of ethical dimensions of geographical research, argues that 'the danger is that the rubber stamp of an ethical committee can both bureaucratize ethical reflection and also lull us into forgetting the need to take responsibility for thinking ethically on a day-to-day basis' (2005, p.485). As I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, criticisms of institutional ethics procedures often focus on this limited snapshot of the ethical aspects of a research project. This is predicated on the assumption that the ethical aspects of research are easily identifiable at the start of the research and will not change. As many of the chapters in this book reveal, this is never the case.

In her chapter Nora Fagerholm provides a useful discussion of the different stages of a participatory GIS process, drawing on the work of Giacomo Rambaldi, Peter Kwaku Kyem, Mike McCall and Daniel Weiner (2006). While no research follows a simple linear pattern, the identification of planning, data collection, analysis and dissemination stages is helpful, with each stage bringing up different ethical challenges. When researching internationally there is also a clear moment when you leave 'the field' in terms of physical proximity and as Kamakshi Perera-Mubarak highlights in her chapter on post-tsunami Sri Lanka in this volume, there are ethical aspects of how you leave the field and delivering on your commitments from a distance.



One aspect which Fagerholm's discussion of research stages does not cover is funding. Research funding is often very difficult to obtain, but researchers, regardless of their career stage need to consider the potential conditionalities attached to certain funding sources and should always ensure that participants are aware of the funding source as part of the informed consent process (although see, Bryant and Skinner, this volume on notions of informed consent, especially within ethnographic fieldwork) and funding sources are acknowledged in publications. A high profile case where funding sources became the focus of specific disagreements was the *México Indígena* project, involving participatory mapping among indigenous groups in Southern Mexico. This project was funded by the US Army's Foreign Military Studies Office through the American Geographical Society's Bowman Expedition Program (see the commentaries in *Political Geography*, 2010 for more details).

The ownership and dissemination of research findings is another key aspect of the research process which requires ethical considerations. As this book is particularly targeted at PhD students, I would strongly recommend that you check your university requirements regarding the publication of your PhD. As part of moves to make PhD research widely accessible most UK institutions now require students to submit their theses electronically so they can be published online. This has been a common practice in many other parts of the Global North for some time. Significant care needs to be given to ensuring that potentially sensitive material is not made public. For example, Lisa Ingwall King, a Geography PhD student at Royal Holloway working on ecosystem services in Guyana, has collected information about fishing grounds from members of indigenous communities in the Rupununi river basin. She has mapped these as part of her analysis regarding the temporal and spatial changes in ecosystem service provisioning. However, the details of these fishing grounds are sensitive and the communities she worked with do not want the specifics to be made available to a

wider audience. She has therefore ensured that the final version of the thesis will not include the maps containing sensitive information (see also Fagerholm, this volume). Copies of the maps themselves are of course, available to community members as they own the data. This was agreed with the community representatives as part of the discussions about the research project. The need to exclude particular pieces of information from any dissemination outputs is also discussed by Andrew Brooks (this volume) regarding survival strategies of low-income research participants.

An acknowledgement of the ongoing nature of ethical issues in research and the need to understand ethical practice as a negotiated, social process between researchers and participants has been a particular focus of research adopting a participatory approach, especially participatory action research (PAR). For Caitlin Cahill, Farhana Sultana and Rachel Pain in their introduction to a special issue of *ACME* on participatory ethics: 'Our conceptualization of a participatory ethics is motivated by a vision for 'what could be', and the possibilities of addressing asymmetries of power, privilege, and knowledge production' (2007, p. 306). This ethical understanding of the nature of research focuses on a form of engaged scholarship and collaboration.

While participatory research approaches have become more common in geographical research in the Global South, there are significant obstacles to fully-fledged PAR projects, particularly for graduate students who have not had previous engagement with the communities and/or organisations they end up working in and with. Working with a community to identify a problem which needs to be tackled and then following through with a participatory methodology, and submitting a thesis within the time frame required is decidedly challenging. However, the broad debate about participatory ethics can also inform

other kinds of research in the Global South. For example, Megan Blake (2007) discusses the concept of 'negotiated consent' and how the logistics and timing of this differ from the formalised 'informed consent' paperwork which ethics reviews often require. Participants are given information about the research before an interview or other activity, but it is only after the interview that consent is more formally discussed. This allows the participant to make a more informed decision and to be specific about which pieces of information they would like withdrawn, whether they want to be anonymous and so on. Consent can be given in writing, or through audio/visual recording.

Similar approaches have been adopted in community-led research. Project COBRA (Community owned best practice for sustainable resource adaptive management in the Guiana Shield, South America) is a collaborative project between European and South American university researchers, civil society organisations and indigenous communities involving participatory mapping, video and photography, among other approaches, to develop community-owned resource management solutions (see: [www.projectcobra.org](http://www.projectcobra.org)). Discussions about the nature of the research, the methods to be used, the ownership of the outputs and the dissemination of the results were all completed before the project formally began, but there is an ongoing process of negotiation with individual participants, communities and organisations as the project unfolds. An openness and willingness to discuss tensions and potential problems has also been important in providing space for negotiations about research ethics (see Mistry and Berardi 2012 for discussion of these issues in earlier project).

## **Conclusions**

This volume provides important, honest insights into the grounded realities of conducting human and environmental geographical research in the Global South. Across the chapters the clear messages are that there is no one correct way to conduct research 'ethically' despite what formalised paperwork from ethics review boards suggests, and that everyone has doubts about the decisions they make during research. It is also very likely that we have all done things in our research than in hindsight we would do differently. In this chapter I have been wary of providing answers to ethical dilemmas that we face in our research, as I wanted to stress the contingent, relational nature of ethical praxis. However, as a final point I want to reinforce the importance of sharing concerns and dilemmas about how we conduct our research, what questions we ask, who we work with and how our research is used. Books such as this one are an important element of these debates, but so are more informal discussions we have with collaborators and research participants, as well as with colleagues, fellow students and supervisors.

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