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## Struggling with roles and positionality: Reflections on field research in rural Nepal

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In this article, we deal with challenges and struggles that occurred during field research in a cross-cultural context in the Global South. It discusses especially the experiences on the complexity of power relations, hierarchical structures, responsibility and ethics among the researchers and the research assistants. We both conducted qualitative research in rural villages in the Middle Hills of Western Nepal and worked with marginalized and disadvantaged groups.

Research in cross-cultural settings often require for support of research assistants. As entire processes of research projects are shaped by the researcher's personality and positionality (Katz 1994), an additional layer of complexity is added when a research assistant is included. A researcher's role inherently involves power relations and hierarchical structures determined by his or her positionality. Adams & Megaw (1997 p. 219) note that

power and asymmetrical relations are there before we realize it, "by virtue of your education, your links into overseas networks of information finance and logistic support, and your access to all the trappings of academic power (...)". Determined by different backgrounds of researcher and research assistant, the research project is shaped by dual subjectivity and perspective. Different hierarchical positions and power are distributed unintentionally and automatically among researcher, research assistant and the researched. In response to this imbalance and unequal relations in research, feminist methodologies motivate to ideally strive for flat hierarchies and an increased mutual exchange between the participant parties (Bondi 2003; England 1994; Reyes 2020).

The inclusion of research assistants poses additional challenges to field research. We want to highlight these challenges and hurdles that influence the entire research setting. Having such a research constellation, Turner (2010 p. 215) speaks of a "triple subjectivity", or a triple representational dilemma that includes the roles and interactions of the researcher, the researched and the research assistant. To date, the reflections on the collaborations with local research assistants, especially in the Global South, are scarce. As researchers, we are responsible for the collected data and all participants and parties involved. It is thus of utmost relevance to reflect thoroughly on our positionality and possible implications. In the following, we share our experiences, snapshots and reflections on conducting field research in a still predominantly patriarchal society, accompanied by female research assistants. The contribution rounds off with possible approaches from a feminist methodology perspective.

### A research assistant is not a passive tool

*Setting the scene:* For both research projects field research was conducted in in the Middle Hills region of Western Nepal that is characterized through green hillsides and rocky mountainous terrain. Some of the villages are reachable by local bus or car, but several are only accessible by hiking a few hours or days. The region ranges from 600 m a.s.l. in the river valley of Seti Gandaki up to approximately 4'000 m a.s.l. in the Annapurna Mountains. Originally inhabited by the ethnic group Gurung, the villages nowadays include a broad range of diverse caste and ethnic groups from across the country.

*Jana:*

For my master's thesis I set out to explore and study how homestay tourism might represent a form of women's empowerment in rural Nepal. For women, who are often culturally and traditionally bound to a domestic setting, the concept of homestays constitutes an opportunity to generate income without requiring to venture out of the house and village community. Women empowerment, especially against the theoretical backdrop of developing studies, is a complex and multi-faceted concept that includes a large variety of aspects and implications (Mosedale 2005). I am particularly interested in the rural women's own perspectives and perceptions on shifts of their status and role within the family and society. Furthermore, in my thesis I aim at revealing the relationship and clash between institutional policy and motives related to establishing homestays, and the actual, lived realities of female villagers. In light of this focus on women, I decided to hire a female research assistant. This seemed relevant to me for three main reasons: firstly, I assumed that women would feel more comfortable talking to and offering insights about their personal experiences with other women; secondly, I personally felt more comfortable about the idea of traveling and working with a female assistant, as I intended to establish a flat hierarchical

work environment; I was convinced it would be easier to bond and connect on a personal level among women; and lastly, I felt compelled to support a female student in giving her the opportunity to be involved in such a project for the experience and income. Reflecting on this argumentation, I was fully aware of the ambiguity in the attempt to flatten hierarchical structures. Already the possibility that I could hire a research assistant to support me, highlighted the reality of privilege I possess coming from the Global North.

Conducting fieldwork in a culturally different context not only required a profound reflection upon my own positionality as a researcher with an outsider perspective, it also uncovered different levels of dependencies on assistance in bridging the gaps. The experience raised my awareness about the important role field assistants play for the outcome and success of a research project. To carry out qualitative interviewing as an outsider in Nepal, I fully relied on the support and involvement of a local interpreter. However, I realized there are several less pragmatic layers of relevance the cooperation with a research assistant entails for research, such as the personal relationship that is formed during fieldwork that determines the level of support among each other.

In March 2020, I ventured into the field with my research assistant Anjila and visited ten villages in the Machhapuchhre region during two full weeks. We carried out qualitative interviews with women who run a homestay business in these villages. Anjila guided me through the villages while we relied *ad hoc* on the information and description of routes by local villagers. I relied on her for fulfilling the centerpiece of data collection. Embracing this dependency was an important aspect for both of us resulting in an interesting and complex dynamic in terms of hierarchy, responsibility, and constant renegotiation and shifts of roles. While the research project was conducted under my name and based on my research design and concept, the practical execution on-site, conducting the interviews in Nepali, depended entirely on Anjila. Her task also included to establish the contact to the villagers I wanted to talk to. Although I prepared the interview questions, the style and tone in which these questions were asked by her, played a vital role in terms of quality, length, and detail of the answers of the interviewees. The relationship that unfolds in the process of interviewing was constituted by Anjila who formed the pivot around which the exchange between me and the rural women took place.

According to my experience, the responsibility in the field was equally distributed, but merely formed and shaped



Figure 1: Anjila (l.) and Jana (r.) on the way to Ghalel village (Schmid, 2020).

differently. Venturing out alone as a young woman, accompanied by another young female is still an uncommon situation in the context of rural Nepal. Although Anjila's efforts of information gathering on-site were key in organizing the fieldwork, she relied on me for taking on the responsibility about safety and logistics. She expected me to be in charge of the key decision-making about duration, location, and structure of the fieldwork. She expressed her relief that we had this companionship in the field because it was her first time traveling, staying in lodges, and interacting with strangers. Travelling in twos, she felt more self-confident and motivated. Her statements of traveling alone for the first time and using external accommodation options seemed peculiar to me as she was already in her early twenties. But only then I realized that exactly differences like these are the reason why reflecting on our positionality, our backgrounds, age and gender are decisive when working with a research assistant.

In conclusion, choosing a female assistant was not only important in terms of the focus on women and their living conditions in rural villages, but also in terms of the work relationship of our hierarchical positions in the field. The nature of working closely together in remote areas with limited accommodation infrastructure led to a blending between professional and private aspects that enriched my research project.

*Sarah:*

To conduct field research for my dissertation project in Nepal would not be a challenge for me I thought as I could refer to previous experiences of fieldwork in other Asian contexts from Vietnam and Myanmar. After roughly 7 months of fieldwork in five different rural villages between 2016 and 2018, I admit that I was still surprised with several fieldwork issues. The work and collaboration with a research assistant added more to the complexity of subjectivity and perspectives – a triple subjectivity – for my research project. My dissertation project investigates demographic transition and population ageing in countries of the Global South. I explore, how older people's living conditions change affected by these current demographic and socio-economic developments and how the older people themselves perceive and assess these changes (Speck 2017).

For the execution of qualitative interviews in the villages, I needed an assistant to act as an interpreter. The hiring of an assistant already put me into a superior hierarchical level: who am I, that I can just walk into the campus of Pokhara University, and pay any student to support me in my research plans? I asked myself this question several

times. Being accompanied by a research assistant put another intermediate layer of power relation between me and the older villagers I wanted to talk to. Therefore, I aimed to optimize for a flatter hierarchy between me and my research assistant Urmila before entering the villages. However, an asymmetrical power relation was already rooted in the employment relationship (Stevano & Deane 2017). I was put unintentionally into a higher hierarchical position again, as I am almost ten years older than Urmila which made me a *didi*, an older sister, for her. To bridge this divide and avoid a widening gap, I tried to get to know her as well as I could before we went for fieldwork in the villages: as a person, a student, a daughter, and sister of a family. We spent time together at her campus for fieldwork preparation; I joined her and her friends for lunch and coffee breaks, we went shopping necessary things for fieldwork and our stays in the villages. Increasingly I became that particular *didi* for her, a sister, and also a friend. In the villages, we always shared an accommodation, we had breakfast, lunch and dinner together and also helped to carry each other's backpacks during long hikes from village to village. We supported each other mentally and emotionally as we shared experiences of fieldwork fatigue, physical exhaustion due to monsoon weather conditions and high altitudes, long working days and homesickness. Yet, I always kept in mind our researcher-assistant relation. It was a constant reflection and negotiation of responsibilities and roles during fieldwork. I was often reminded of this when, for example, we were mistaken as biological sisters and we had to explain that we work together for a project. As I have Vietnamese Swiss roots and my appearance, dark eyes and hair, easily tanned skin, frequently local villagers thought that I was a local as well. Nonetheless, I did research in a context that was completely foreign to me; I have only been to Nepal for a 2-week course before. Hence, Urmila acted not just as a mere interpreter but as well took a consultant role translating socio-cultural issues to me. "Take off your shoes", was one of the most frequent phrases I heard at the beginning of my fieldwork when we, for example, entered the patio or veranda of a house. She was always concerned to make it comfortable for researcher and researched, cleared up misunderstandings, apologized repeatedly for me dropping a brick again. Even so, she was a stranger to the local villagers as well as she grew up in Bhaktapur. This additional layer of Urmila's positionality, her values and conceptions of course influenced my research significantly, resulting in a so-called triple subjectivity. Further, I think the complexity is even levelled up





Figure 2: Sarah (l.) and Urmila (r.) taking a break in Ghachok village (Speck, 2016)

again with socio-cultural differences and language barriers. At times we even carried out the interviews trilingual (Nepali, Gurung and English).

As a researcher I take responsibility for each step of the research project, for the researched and their anonymity and security. I felt constantly responsible for my research assistant. Accident insurance through employment like I know it from Switzerland: not available. Urmila was responsible for her own insurance, for travel and health. I often imagined “what if” scenarios: what if she would fall seriously sick, catch typhoid or food poisoning? What if she would twist an ankle or break a leg during the long hikes between the villages? To be honest in retrospect, these hikes were not always without danger. We once had to climb a path that was washed away and spilled by a huge landslide along the turbulent Seti Gandaki. Luckily, we were accompanied or rather guided by a handful children of primary school age who were heading to school.

Reflecting on the many weeks I spent in and outside the rural villages with Urmila, I would assess our researcher-assistant relation as relatively flat and reciprocal: I could conduct my research and she confirmed that she learnt a lot during fieldwork with me about planning, implementation and data processing. I never took Urmila as “only the research assistant” as I was highly dependent on her to conduct my interviews. After all phases of fieldwork, I asked Urmila if she would like to share her experience working with me. Her answer in short was: “In general, I enjoyed fieldwork, it was always exciting to learn new things, methods for fieldwork and to meet new people

and travel to remote villages. Of course, it was exhausting and demanding at times. Sometimes it was very boring for me as well as I had to ask the same questions over and over, but I got the routine. Finally, my work also helped for my resume and successfully applying to master’s study abroad”.

### Retrospective

Based on these two experiences of field research in a rural setting of the Global South, we conclude that the role and influence of a field assistant on the outcome of a research project is highly significant. Conducting fieldwork seems characterized by a gap between the activity, responsibility, and engagement of the different roles in the field representation publication (Sultana 2007). However, the key role of the research assistant largely remains invisible and occur in the background. Their experiences and opinions of remain mostly silent and unvoiced (Speck 2020; Turner 2010). The educational background, their values and social upbringing influence our research and data collection in the field tremendously as they add their positionality to our research process. The additional bias is not always of adverse effect but completes our research projects with a more diversified perspective, enriching it with their contributions. We realized that keeping the organizational issues (e.g., shared accommodation) flat in terms of hierarchy allows for a more intimate work environment and relationship. Especially in Jana’s case, as she focuses on the social status and empowerment of women, choosing a female assistant supported her immensely in

carrying out her research project in a country that is predominantly still patriarchal.

We think that being fully aware and actively reflect of our positionalities and its implications does not remove bias.

The differing realities of the so often discussed North-South divide, particularly the status and many advantages of researchers from the North who would invade “extract” (Adams & Megaw 1997 p. 219) data from the South, are already preprogrammed. Our tinted glasses or how we act, interpret or play our roles in the field are already determined and always negotiated and adjusted *ad hoc*. Nonetheless, we think that we could contribute to Urmila and Anjila’s social status as female researchers in their own context and lives. Vice versa, we benefited tremendously from their endless effort and work during many fieldtrips.

As Turner notes (Turner 2010 p. 208) we should not see field assistants as “agent for transferring messages between the informant and the field worker – a kind of passive instrument”. We strongly agree to this statement as the results and outcome of the research project is based and enriched on mutual collaboration and exchange. It is thus our responsibility as researchers, to remember and think about the crucial roles of assistants in field research. Their voices should not remain silent or invisible at all.

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