# Reflexivity, Positionality and Participatory Ethics: Negotiating Fieldwork Dilemmas in International Research

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**Abstract**

There are critical disjunctures between aspects of everyday behaviour in the field and the University's institutional frameworks that aim to guide/enforce good ethical practice, as the conduct of fieldwork is always contextual, relational, embodied, and politicized. This paper argues that it is important to pay greater attention to issues of reflexivity, positionality and power relations in the field in order to undertake ethical and participatory research. Drawing from international fieldwork experience, the paper posits that such concerns are even more important in the context of multiple axes of difference, inequalities, and geopolitics, where the ethics and politics involved in research across boundaries and scales need to be heeded and negotiated in order to achieve more ethical research practices.

**Introduction**

The challenges of implementing institutional ethics formalities in the settings of the Global South are often very different from research contexts in the Global North, where issues such as literacy, access, and a sense of equality usually

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present fewer barriers, even if they may still be problematic. Even if the researcher is from the Global South, in which case some of the access and relational aspects may be addressed, class and educational differences (i.e. material, social, political power differences) remain trenchant markers of difference, and often precondition exploitation in the research process. Conducting international fieldwork involves being attentive to histories of colonialism, development, globalization and local realities, to avoid exploitative research or perpetuation of relations of domination and control. It is thus imperative that ethical concerns should permeate the entire process of the research, from conceptualization to dissemination, and that researchers are especially mindful of negotiated ethics in the field.

A key concern in pursuing international fieldwork that has plagued critical/feminist scholars is the issue of representation, where over-concern about positionality and reflexivity appear to have paralyzed some scholars into avoiding fieldwork and engaging more in textual analysis; in other instances, criticism of research for perpetuating neocolonial representations, having Western biases, and purporting to speak 'for' women, has generated resistance to engage with fieldwork. This is an important concern, as writing 'with' rather than writing 'about' is a challenge that scholars have taken up in recent years in order to redress concerns about marginalization, essentialisms, and differences in representation. Nagar (2002) argues that there is an 'impasse' in feminist geography now, where fears of (mis)representation and (in)authenticity have led to a general withdrawal from fieldwork in the Global South, which means that fewer scholars are engaged in research that can be politically and materially useful for the poor in the Global South. However, such fears and 'impasse' can be overcome by understanding that fieldwork can be productive and liberating, as long as researchers keep in mind the critiques and undertake research that is more politically engaged, materially grounded, and institutionally sensitive (Nagar 2002). In this paper, drawing from my own research experience in Bangladesh, and insights from feminist scholarship, I argue that ethical research is produced through negotiated spaces and practices of reflexivity that is critical about issues of positionality and power relations at multiple scales.

What is understood as ethical participatory research has been heavily influenced by debates around feminist methodology. Feminist geographers have engaged in debates on reflexivity, positionality, difference and representation in research in recent years (Nast 1994; Staeheli and Lawson 1994; McDowell 1999), and several scholars have debated at length how to undertake reflexive research while still engaging in material and political struggles that have meaning and relevance (England 1994; Katz 1994; Radcliffe 1994; Wolf 1996; Mountz 2002; Nagar 2002; Raju 2002; Staeheli and Nagar 2002). Many feminist methodologies emphasize non-hierarchical interactions, understanding, and mutual learning, where close attention is paid to how the research questions and methods of data collection may be embedded in unequal power relations between the researcher and research

participants (Jones et al. 1997; Moss 2002; Bondi 2003). Being attentive to the politics of knowledge production and processes of research has become important to feminist geographers, by being analytical and reflexive about their fieldwork and research process, challenging pre-given categories and narratives, and being attentive to power, knowledge and context (England 1994; Katz 1994; Hurd 1998; Moss 2002). Reflexivity in research involves reflection on self, process, and representation, and critically examining power relations and politics in the research process, and researcher accountability in data collection and interpretation (Jones et al. 1997; Falconer Al-Hindi and Kawabata 2002). It is important that this occurs from the beginning to the end of the research process; just adding it on at the end is mere introspection which can leave positivist methodologies intact. A reflexive research process can open up the research to more complex and nuanced understandings of issues, where boundaries between process and content can get blurred.[2]

While it has been argued that reflexivity can result in 'navel-gazing', I do not believe that being reflexive about one's own positionality is to self-indulge but to reflect on how one is inserted in grids of power relations and how that influences methods, interpretations, and knowledge production (cf. Kobayashi 2003). It is also implicated in how one relates to research participants and what can/cannot be done vis-à-vis the research within the context of institutional, social, and political realities. As such, it is integral to conducting ethical research. Peake and Trotz argue that acknowledging one's positionality or subjectivity should not mean abandoning fieldwork, rather:

> It can strengthen our commitment to conduct good research based on building relations of mutual respect and recognition. It does, however, entail abandoning the search for objectivity in favour of critical provisional analysis based on plurality of (temporally and spatially) situated voices and silences. Peake and Trotz (1999: 37)

As a result, as Nagar et al. (2002) note, local analysis can be embedded within broader processes and better explanations garnered of how issues of social justice, equity and democracy are implicated in development/globalization processes. Being reflexive is important in situating the research and knowledge production so that ethical commitments can be maintained. Often ethics are then shifted away from the strict codes of institutional paperwork, towards moral and

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[2] Furthermore, as Falconer Al-Hindi and Kawabata (2002: 114) put it, "Writing about research conducted in the more fully reflexive mode…requires that the researcher identify and locate herself, not just in the research, but also in the writing. She must be willing to wire and so re-live discomforting experiences, to look awkward and feel ill at ease. She must commit to paper and thus to the scrutiny of peers and others that which she might prefer to forget."

mutual relations with a commitment to conducting ethical and respectful research that minimizes harm.

## Positionality, reflexivity and fieldwork (e)motions

My research focuses on water resources management and the gendered/classed implications of access to water, and more specifically the implications of a drinking water crisis from arsenic contamination of groundwater sources in rural Bangladesh.[3] Most of the research was conducted in eighteen remote rural villages of four districts which were feeling the effects of arsenic-induced drinking water crises, and involved semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, case studies, and participant observation. The research also included interviews and discussions with state policy-makers, planners, international development agencies as well as NGOs, research institutions, and academics. The research was conducted between 2003-05 for my doctoral dissertation.

Returning to Bangladesh to conduct fieldwork posed several dilemmas for me. What constitutes the 'field' versus 'home' is a problematic distinction, as returning to Bangladesh to do fieldwork was by no means returning 'home'. The field sites were all rural, quite different from the capital city of Dhaka, where I was born and had mostly grown up in; the socio-economic context was also quite different. Yet strong family ties to rural areas (where many relatives still live) also made me feel very familiar with such settings. While similar historical and political processes might locate me with my research participants, the 'native' can be the 'other' through a class privilege (Lal 1996). I was acutely aware of my class and educational privilege (through material and symbolic differences). As such, I was simultaneously an insider, outsider, both and neither (Gilbert 1994; Mullings 1999). The borders that I crossed, I feel, are always here within me, negotiating the various locations and subjectivities I simultaneously feel a part of and apart from. The ambivalences, discomfort, tensions and instabilities of subjective positions became important to be reflexive about and work through, where the contradictions in my positionality and in-between status had to be constantly reworked as I undertook fieldwork.[4]

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[3] See Sultana (2006, 2007a, 2007b) for greater details on the case, especially Sultana (2007a) for more elaborate discussions of the issues raised in this brief paper.

[4] Trinh Minh-ha (1997: 418) argues that post-colonial women often are found in such positions: "Not quite the same, not quite the other, she stands in that undetermined threshold place where she constantly drifts in and out. Undercutting the inside/outside opposition, her intervention is necessarily that of both not quite an insider and not quite an outsider. She is, in other words, this inappropriate 'other' or 'same' who moves about with always at least two gestures: that of affirming

Doing research at 'home' also brings in different dynamics, in terms of concerns of insider-outsider and politics of representation, across other axes of social differentiation beyond commonality in nationality or ethnicity. People placed me in certain categories, exerted authority/subservience, 'othered' me and negotiated the relationship on a continual basis. Nonetheless, many commonalities – such as my nationality, gender, ethnicity, attire, ability to engage in regular conversation in the local dialect and live in the rural areas – enabled me to bridge gaps and become more accepted over time. As many people told me, I was after all a *deshi*[5] girl, and talking to a *deshi* girl (even if an outsider and from the city) was not generally perceived to be a problem. I put in considerable effort to blend in as much as I could, ever conscious of my difference and the power relations inherent in that. It would be naïve of me to assume that I became an 'insider' or that the relationships were ever fully equal, but I believe that who I am and the way I interacted with people helped in forming the relations of trust that are important in fieldwork. I know that I was only able to partially access the lives of the people I was interested in. The important thing for me was to be as faithful to the relations in that space and time, and to the stories that were shared and the knowledge that was produced through the research, however partial. In this respect, while the rural women and I did not share the same identity, we were able to share affinities (Haraway 1991) that helped us have some common ground from which to speak (also Nagar and Raju 2003).

What perhaps concerned me the most about my positionality was the clear class difference. I was from the city, from an educated background, could read and write (in English no less!). Such overt differences immediately put me in a different location, and often in one of hierarchy, where people in rural areas have come to respect and be deferential to urban, educated elites. The fact that I wore shoes, a watch, carried a notebook, had a camera, all placed me in an irreconcilable position of difference. What perhaps generated most interest though was my short hair. Not having long flowing hair, but having a boyish haircut, apparently made me less feminine, and more 'modernized'. Some women would get a glimpse of my hair through the *orna* (scarf) on my head.[6] Many women would touch my hair and ask why I don't grow it long and if something was wrong with it. Some would

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'I am like you' while persisting in her difference and that of reminding 'I am different' while unsettling every definition of otherness arrived at."

[5] The word *deshi* generally means 'from Bangladesh'. It can also mean from the same district or locality. Such affinities (whether national or regional) made most people very warm and welcoming to me, often conferring an unsaid but tentative 'insider' status in the process.

[6] The *orna* (or *dupatta*) is a part of the traditional *salwar-kameez* outfit, often worn draping the shoulders, but I wrapped it around my head to maintain decorum and modesty, rather than for observing strict *purdah*, as well as for protection from the bright sun or cold wind as I was outdoors most of the day.

giggle and say "tsk, tsk, what manly hairstyle, doesn't suit you. You should grow out your hair!" My shoes were another spectacle, as I wore sneakers (for my back and foot pain); such shoes are rarely worn by women, even in the city, and such masculine footwear made me an object of scrutiny and fun. Children would point to them and ask why I wore men's shoes. Such conversations were usually humorous, but did repeatedly bring up the visual and physical signs of difference.

People were by and large incredibly willing to talk freely, and very welcoming into their homes. The curiosity and interest aroused from an outsider's presence in the *bari* (homestead) or *para* (neighborhood) also resulted in children following me around and women showing up during interviews to find out what was going on in someone else's kitchen or courtyard. The warmth and hospitality shown, even from the poorest household, with food, tea, a chair or stool to sit on, all further exemplified the sincere generosity that people showed towards a guest. It also, unfortunately, made me even more conscious of the deference that people showed sometimes, perhaps more than might be conferred to a local guest. It made me uncomfortable, yet refusing hospitality is considered offensive to the host/hostess, so I had to constantly negotiate my positionality through everyday acts such as what I ate, how I arranged to sit (especially the height, if on a chair or stool as that signified a vertical hierarchy as well), and where I sat (often I sat on the floor or on short stools in kitchens or courtyards while women continued with their chores). Such little actions, however mundane, are not insignificant I believe, and speak to the embodied situatedness of me as the researcher that I had to constantly keep in mind. Despite the differences, it was an overwhelming commonality that most people stressed. The naturalized acceptance of my presence, despite the curiosity of why I was there and where I was from, resulted in a collective positioning of me generally as an acceptable outsider doing 'useful' research. Nonetheless, this raised questions of how I could play with different positionalities to build rapport with different people, while being attentive to the ethics and politics involved in such processes of 'fitting in' and the power relations that are involved (even through the everyday actions such as where I sat, how I dressed, how I addressed people, etc.). Such concerns are not captured in the 'good' ethical guidelines of institutional paperwork, but have to be negotiated and grappled with on a daily basis in the field.

However, I found that while I was conscious of differences and hierarchies in the field and post-fieldwork analysis/writing, I was also 'othered' by those who were observing and studying me in the field. This was perhaps particularly true of the men I interviewed, especially in educated and policy circles. The reverse power relations were obvious in the many rejections of meetings, disregarding appointments granted, guarded responses and rushed interviews, and condescending attitude towards me and my work. I found that people also positioned me with ties to not only (privileged) educational institutions in the West ("You are educated abroad and know more, what do we poor know?"), but also

with the US and its global hegemony ("So what is 'your' American government up to in Iraq?").[7] Contrasting such positionings were more frequent sentiments of acceptance ("Your research might be useful to us poor, so it is good that you are here") as well as scrutiny ("How can you help us get safe water?").  Such positioning in multiple locations meant that research ethics had to be negotiated in practice on a continual basis. Similarities and differences that emerge through the relations that are involved in the research process demonstrated the ways that alliances and collaborations can be forged, rather than an a priori agenda before the research was undertaken. Such fluidity and openness in the research process is not always easy to enact or maintain, especially when inserted into multiple scales of power relations and institutional affiliations, time/budget constraints, and distances (physical, emotional, philosophical, political).

In other instances, in many of the rural villages I lived and worked in, some male elders talked down to me and were condescending; or refused to answer all the questions and were more interested in my family background and political affiliations; or belabored how women have too much power these days (i.e. signifying that my being both a woman asking questions, and being unchaperoned by a male kin/elder, were perhaps a glaring threat to patriarchal norms and normalcy of the area). I had to politely engage with or listen to such conversations, and steer them back to my research questions. Dealing with such power relations where I am being placed in a particular understanding of what women are or should be, meant that I did sometimes have to make the patriarchal bargain (cf. Kandiyoti 1988) in negotiating what was in the best interest in both getting my research done and not offending the respondent. While this did make me uncomfortable, I have faced similar diatribe and exercise of authority from educated 'modernized' men in the city, and sometimes from elders in my own family, and have learnt to either respond in a diplomatic manner or handle it with humor (depending on the situation and the person). As such, power relations can work both ways, especially if one is a young female researcher in an overtly patriarchal field context. In this manner, fieldwork was an intensely personal experience for me. It felt like being part of a larger family where people felt free to prod, pry, and pontificate. It also raised questions about the ethics and politics of research involving negotiating relationships that simultaneously are respectful and allowed the research to proceed (to the extent possible).

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[7] Such comments were often made in humor, as I am not a US citizen but was studying in the US, and most people knew that. But by situating me geopolitically and institutionally in such strategic ways, people were invoking the problems they had with my affiliation and my identity in such contexts. I was positioned within multiple and overlapping grids of differentiation and affinity that were gendered, classed, spatialized, and geo-politicized.

Another aspect that raised questions for me about ethical research concerned how we bridge differences and produce research that is mutually defined. Indeed, few scholars openly speak of the collaborations, connections, and solidarities that did not materialize, or that could not come to fruition, in a research process.[8] The mutuality of such processes does not hinge only on the researcher, even if researchers feel the burden to initiate, sustain, and nurture such relationships. The roles of people at the other end of the potential relationships are important to the ways that the relationships are formed and play out. For instance, many women in the villages I worked and stayed in did not see how we could become friends, as the ingrained notion of the class divide made them feel that it was impossible, and at best only temporary. They often laughed that an urban, educated female would ever want to develop relationships or maintain contact, given their prior knowledge or experience with development researchers who were detached, arrogant, or fleetingly present in the field. When I told people that I was trying to capture a variety of experiences with arsenic, water, and development, and that everyone's opinion was important, this was met with some initial cynicism or suspicion as well. Such skepticism is valid, and we had to work within and through such perceptions. The refusal to participate in the research also demonstrated the exercise of power and agency of (potential) research participants in the field. As one woman scoffed, while she walked away from my attempts to speak with her, "Not another one of you people with more questions again." Such experiences occurred more often in villages that had been over-studied by various development organizations and NGOs, compared to villages where there were fewer external interventions.[9] Such rejections to participate in the research also sometimes occurred when I informed people that I was not with a project that was donating tubewells or other water technologies, as people had come to expect direct tangible benefits from outside researchers (and were also in desperate need of safe water sources); sadly I was not in a position to provide these then. Research in a particular location is thus often influenced and constrained by the politics of the place and the overall politics of development, which have to be acknowledged and respected in any research process.

Therefore the processes and power relations through which field research plays out are important. It is critical to address the researcher/research participants binary, and renegotiate power relations, responsibilities and hierarchy within the

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[8] See Nagar with Ali (2003) for a poem that describes one situation where fruitful collaboration could not be pursued. The embodied nature of collaboration is often understudied, but fieldwork is an intensely embodied experience and process, and needs greater attention too.

[9] My sense is that this is often due to 'survey fatigue' due to multiple and repeated surveys conducted by 'development' projects/scholars in an area. Bangladesh is one of the most highly studied and intervention-ridden countries for the development industry, both due to grinding levels of poverty and a long history of international donor and NGO-driven development schemes.

constraints and contexts of any given research endeavor. Consensual research is possible when different identities are understood and accepted, not assuming that there is equality across all researcher and research participants involved. The research participants also have contested identities that emerge through the research process, and experience of the research project can alter and challenge the identities and power relations that research participants have (Domosh 2003). For research participants to have meaningful roles, we need to recognize that differences in power, knowledges, and truth claims are constantly negotiated.

The knowledges produced thus are within the context of our intersubjectivities and the places we occupy at that moment (physically and spatially as well as socially, politically, and institutionally). Knowledge is always partial and representations of knowledges produced through field research embody power relations that the researcher must be aware of in undertaking ethical research. Intersubjective learning is important in such processes, which are often iterative and difficult to pre-define in institutional ethics forms and research proposals. The knowledge produced in research occurs within the context of the research process, embedded within broader social relations and development processes that place me and my respondents in different locations. As such, my findings will always be interpretive and partial, yet telling of stories that may otherwise not be told (about water, arsenic, sufferings, gender relations, development, etc.), and revealing broader patterns that may or may not be stable over time and space. Being ethical and true to the relations and experiences that occurred in the field were important to me. Being true to the context, the specificities, and the interpretations made has to reflect such problematics. Responsibilities to self, others, research outcome (a doctoral dissertation), disciplinary boundaries, and institutional ethical review approval are all imbricated in the daily lived experience of the fieldwork.

## Conclusion

It is critical to pay attention to positionality, reflexivity, the production of knowledge and the power relations that are inherent in research processes in order to undertake ethical research, especially in international field research contexts. Reflecting on my positionality vis-à-vis the way others constructed my identity helped in more fully engaging in reflexivity, that enabled engagement with the research process in a more meaningful way (cf. Falconer Al-Hindi and Kawabata 2002). My experience has been that positionality and subjectivity are tempered both spatially and temporally, and are unstable and not fixed. Dynamics change with context, and the insider-outsider boundary gets blurred. There is also a politics of time in the research moment, so that temporal positionality becomes important. The political-temporal contingency of the research process (Ward and Jones 1999) is often overlooked. Thus, the political and temporal instability of issues in Global South contexts may result in certain issues being interpreted or told in certain ways,

and producing silences in others. Such issues raise concerns for all seeking to conduct ethical research in such contexts. While some scholars have argued that acknowledgement of positionality, reflexivity, identity, and representation does not necessarily result in politically engaged research and writing, and may not result in destabilizing existing power relations or bring about dramatic changes, the alternative of not heeding such issues is even more problematic. Recognizing and working with multiple positionalities of researchers and research participants that are constantly negotiated is needed in creating ethical relations, which should be encouraged and embraced in undertaking challenging but rewarding field research. Attempts to institutionalize ethical frameworks are not sufficient to address or ensure good practice in the field. There are critical disjunctures between aspects of everyday behaviour in the field and the University's institutional frameworks that aim to guide/enforce good ethical practice, as the very conduct of fieldwork is always contextual, relational, embodied, and politicilized. As I have argued here, there are benefits to thinking critically about and paying greater attention to issues of reflexivity, positionality and power relations in the field in order to undertake ethical and participatory research.

## Acknowledgements

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