

POWER RELATIONSHIPS IN RESEARCH IN A POST-COLONIAL CONTEXT



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Aim

The aim of this poster is to help students, researchers, and non-researchers alike to better understand power dynamics involved in research in a post-colonial context.



Context of the research

This reflection is drawn from my experience as a young European woman working on education in Kenya for over a year, including email exchanges with school principals and numerous meetings with officials in Nairobi over three weeks. Through this research, I have learned extensively about ethics and power relationships associated with age, gender and race when conducting research in a post-colonial context.

The place of fieldwork in anthropology

“Fieldwork is how we do anthropology” (Cohen, 2015:5)

The practice of fieldwork has always been at the centre of anthropology. It is perceived as the main way to learn about human cultures and to develop and test new theories about the human behaviour.

Traditional approaches to fieldwork

Fieldwork was initially portrayed as something anthropologist should do. It was associated with the notions of going abroad, observing people from a measured distance, and drawing authoritative conclusions. This has placed the researcher in a place of power, leading the research, defining both what constitutes the field and what is the most important about it.



Malinowski with Trobriand Islanders, 1918. Malinowski was one of the first anthropologists to conduct ethnographies based on participant observation.

Rethinking the ‘field’

Over the past decades, critical theories have started to emerge. For many critical anthropologists, the ‘field’ does not have to be a distant and foreign place anymore. It can be anywhere, at any time. This deeply challenges the perception of a white Western researcher going to a distant indigenous community to observe them. This is a true shift in the traditional hierarchy of academic research.

Emotions and personal identities

The impact of emotions has started to be recognised, as well as the role of personal identities including gender, race, class, and sexuality. In particular, personal identities play a crucial role in the way anthropologists conduct their fieldwork – including choices made and constraints faced – and the conclusions they draw.

The impact of personal identities on fieldwork

Race

Race can impact the conduction of research. It can both put the researcher in a privileged position and make the officials and research participants more doubtful. It is essential for researchers to be aware of the historical context and to remain aware of the privileges and oppressions associated with race. It is particularly important in Kenya, considering Kenyans’ fight to be freed from British occupation and the violent repression they faced.

Gender

Gender often plays an important role in research. Women are often more associated with the domestic sphere than the public sphere in most of Africa (Mudege and Ezeh, 2007). As a result, female researchers are often taken less seriously, and this can deeply limit research possibilities and access to different groups and places.

Seniority

In many African countries including in Kenya, seniority plays a key role in social hierarchy, including in politics and research. This valuation of seniority can impact the conduction of research and limit the agency of young researchers (Fumanti, 2004).

For example: Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of Kenya, was deeply respected by many Kenyans. He has been respectfully called Mzee, which refers to an old person, wise and leader.



President Jomo Kenyatta

Reflections on the impact of my personal identities

During my research in Nairobi, I often felt as if I was believed to have limited knowledge and ability to understand by most officials I met. I had to constantly negotiate my agency as I was not taken seriously by officials and was struggling to be recognised.

Being a young woman

This reduced agency may have come from my identities as a young female. Most officials were senior men and may have considered me too young and unexperienced to be able to conduct valuable research.

Research weariness

The officials may also have been influenced by my identities as a white Western researcher. They may have assumed that I had a limited understanding of the Kenyan culture and limited knowledge. They receive high numbers of requests for research permits from Western researchers, which could reinforce a feeling of research weariness.



Vessels of Genealogy by Fireley Báez. Her work often includes notions of identity and intersectionality.

Solidarity coming from a shared struggle

During my research in Nairobi, the friendliest approach and help I experienced always came from other young women. It was so helpful and very different from most experiences I had had with the middle-aged and senior male officials. In this spontaneous help coming from young women, I often felt in their way of speaking and of taking time for me a sense of solidarity emerging from a shared struggle to negotiate our agency as young women.

Conclusion

- Fieldwork is not just something researchers do, that could be easily defined and controlled.
- Fieldwork is part of the researchers’ and communities’ lives more than it is just a remote place to test theories.
- Researchers emerge in lives and practices and have to work within them, adapt, negotiate their place.
- Identities can have a large impact on the conduction of research, both limiting agency and enabling new interactions and new forms of support.
- This negotiation of agency helps to recognise both the limits of the power of researchers and how research is deeply embedded within the world and can impact it.

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