



Critical review

To “help” or not to “help” the participant: A global South ethnographer’s dilemma in the global South

Md Azmeary Ferdoush

Pentti Kaiteran Katu 1, Geography Research Unit, Room FY 323-I, University of Oulu, FI-90014, Finland



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ABSTRACT

Ethnographers are often faced with the dilemma of whether to help or not help participants, especially those from the global South conducting fieldwork at “home.” While such dilemmas are frequent, rarely any guideline directly engages with them. In this brief paper, I engage with the ethical dilemma of whether to help research participants during fieldwork, especially in the global South where participants are often marginalized populations who may ask for crucial help. In so doing, I first question what should be considered as “help.” Then I juxtapose help with the ethical issues of reciprocity and responsibility. Third, I briefly focus on the emotional burden that ethnographers often become subject to for not being able to help the way they might have wanted and finally, discuss uneven immersion as a tactic to deal with the dilemma.

1. Introduction

It was a bright and pleasant morning of October 2017 when I interviewed Anwar Ali (pseudonym) sitting on the courtyard of his tin-made house in a village of Kurigram district in northern Bangladesh. Anwar is a seventy-year-old farmer who worked his entire life to build that house and own the land on which it stood. As our conversation progressed, he said that there was a dispute of ownership over his land. He showed some letters that he recently received from the local government office. Anwar never went to school and could not entirely make sense of the complicated bureaucratic language on those letters. I explained the issues to Anwar as clearly as I could. This was the moment when he suddenly grabbed my arm and requested to help him. I was in a great fix. Should I help him or not? If yes, to what extent? If not, why not? If I help him, what consequences those might bear upon both Anwar and my fieldwork? What happens once others knew that I was helping Anwar and start expecting similar help from me? Moreover, I was unsure about the local official’s reaction given that they were aware of my research and I still had to interview a few of them. What happens when I leave the “field” and Anwar is left on his own without the issue being completely settled? Probably I could have helped him settle the issue, given my connections, yet I decided against getting “too much” involved and instead offered Anwar some advice. On the one hand, I was not sure whether my “help” would really assist Anwar or further complicate the issue, and on the other, being a graduate student with limited time and resources for the fieldwork, I was worried that such acts

of support might compromise my fieldwork!

Ethnographers are often faced with similar predicaments in the field, especially those from the global South conducting fieldwork in “home” because of the numerous similarities they share with the research participants, cultural patterns, and the biography of the researcher (Ferdoush, 2020; Nagar, 1997; Sultana, 2007; Zaman, 2008). While these dilemmas are frequent, rarely any guideline directly engages with such issues. Therefore, researchers, especially inexperienced ones conducting dissertation fieldwork, often find themselves tangled between their research and the participants with crucial decisions to make without anyone to turn for help or any guideline to look up as they try to navigate through multiple allegiances to themselves, to participants and to academia (Huisman, 2008). This is complicated by the institutional review board’s reductionist approach to ethical concerns and primary goal of protecting the university from potential lawsuits, which leave “no arena for discussing the complex ethical issues that arise from qualitative research” (Chenhall et al., 2011, p. 13; Zavisca, 2007). Further, professional organizations’ apparent reluctance to deeply engaging with these predicaments and tendency of leaving the responsibility solely to the researcher suggests a need for serious dialogue. Moreover, one must critically scrutinize the practice of importing research ethics from the global North to the global South, which often fail to consider the cultural differences, expectations, human engagements, and the ground reality (Israel, 2018).

In this brief paper, I engage with the ethical dilemma of whether to help research participants, especially during ethnographic fieldwork in

E-mail addresses: azmeary.ferdoush@oulu.fi, touzodu.05@gmail.com.

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the global South, where participants are often marginalized populations who may ask for crucial help like that of Anwar. In so doing, I first question what should be considered as “help.” Then I juxtapose help with the ethical issues of reciprocity and responsibility. Third, I briefly focus on the emotional burden that ethnographers often become subject to for not being able to help the participant the way they might have wanted and finally, discuss uneven immersion as a tactic to deal with the dilemma.

2. What is “help,” anyway?

With Judith Stacey asking whether there could be a feminist ethnography in the late 1980s, feminist scholars across disciplines have critically questioned and brought in numerous issues to the core of ethnographic fieldwork, including recognition of the subjective nature of fieldwork, mainstreaming issues of gender in research and above all, acknowledging human emotions and empathy into play (Bondi, 2003; Domosh, 2003; Kobayashi, 1994; Mullings, 1999; Stacey, 1988). Drawing on such scholarship, I contend that we need to critically question what constitutes as “help”. Especially for those who are in a vulnerable position and actively ask for help like that of Anwar, given that an act of support from the researcher carries the potential to make a significant difference in their lives. It is not uncommon for ethnographers to offer minor services to help participants, including baby-sit, reading letters, translating, advising on business ideas, and providing basic medical services (Forsythe, 1999; Okely, 1983; Peneff, 1985). However, these are instances that apparently do not have the potential to make a significant change in participant’s lives and neither to put them in harm’s way. The potential for change and harm are thus the crucial points that I take as my departure in weighing what constitutes a “help.” I contend that as researchers, primarily tasked with immersing ourselves in the lives of others, we need to embrace the idea of help beyond a common sensical unilinear understanding of IRB “good” rules and from the practice of looking away from “harms” that do not directly arise from taking part in the research (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Silverman, 1999; Vanderstaay, 2005). While ethnographers build their careers out of reading people’s lives, the return to such life-long achievements cannot be simply justified by IRB rules and not causing harms to them. Instead, acts that can make significant positive changes and minimize obvious harms, not necessarily arising from the research project but from the lived conditions of participants, must be considered “help” especially if directly asked by a participant from a vulnerable group.

While such a stance may seem radical, emotionally charged, and could result in numerous unwanted consequences, my purpose here is not to flip established ethical guidelines but to broaden the scope of “help” in the field. While I agree with Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) that “Sometimes the ethnographer will have to refuse requests and live with the consequences”, I ask for a reexamination of “offer too much” (2007, p. 70). I contend that the extent of “too much” help must not be conveniently tucked behind the scope of a particular research project but should be judged by the reality of the people on the ground, especially in the global South. This, on the one hand, allows to reflect on the ethical issues that are “hegemonically imposed on the researcher reducing his/her autonomy and responsibility” and on the other, equip researchers to be flexible in offering “help” to participants without being limited by partially applicable ethical concerns imported from the global North (Alcadipani and Hodgson, 2009, p. 129).

3. Ethical issues: Reciprocity and responsibility

The roots of ethical guidelines in social sciences are generally based on the principles of the Nuremberg Code, the Helsinki Declaration and the Belmont Report (Campbell, 2010). Most discussions regarding ethical concerns tend to revolve around three broad principles: Informed consent, anonymity and protection from harm (Alcadipani and

Hodgson, 2009). However, many have broadened the scope by tagging the issues of accountability, context, truthfulness, care, reciprocity, and consequences (Huisman, 2008; Israel, 2015; Madison, 2020). In this section, I focus on the issues of reciprocity and responsibility to contend that “help” sits at the intersection of these two and must be understood as both.

Reciprocity is a strategy used by feminist researchers to challenge the hegemonic and colonial practice of “taking” and instead, to “give back” to research participants in meaningful ways that have the potential to empower and affect power balance between and among researchers and participants (Bakas, 2017; Huisman, 2008; Naples, 2013). Although Marcel Mauss was the first to discuss the significance of gift as a sign of reciprocity in the early twentieth century, serious investigations on how to “authentically” reciprocate is a relatively new study area (Marcus and Curtis, 2016). The nature of reciprocity must take cultural differences, expectations, and challenges into account. Thus, what might be considered an act of reciprocity in one society might not be considered the same in another. This is particularly true when ideas of reciprocity are carried from the global North to the global South and to indigenous communities (Brereton et al., 2014; Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2018). In many cultures, expecting the researcher to be closely involved with private matters and family affairs are not uncommon (Huisman, 2008). Therefore, the boundary between reciprocity and “help” often gets blurred.

As researchers, denying responsibility toward the participants and communities we study must be deemed unethical. Responsibility, in this sense, possesses two properties, a) to help participants in a meaningful way, especially when they ask for it; and b) assessing responsibility with a reasonable judgment of harm and possible negative consequences. Nonetheless, it remains significant to acknowledge that “the occurrence of harm within the context of a piece of qualitative research does not necessarily imply that the researcher is to blame” (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012, p. 68). Thus, to shy away from helping participants cannot be justified with the excuse of causing unintended harm in every instance. At the same time, as researchers, we need to be more sensitive to events when participants reveal that something troubles them and they need help, in particular, when it raises questions of moral obligations (Ciuk and Lathusek, 2018; Tiedemann, 2021). Consequently, I contend that helping research participants must be seriously considered within the codes of ethics involving human subject as an act of reciprocity and responsibility. It is further applicable in situations where researchers possess abilities and resources to bring meaningful differences in their participant’s lives without jeopardizing the research project, particularly in the global South where minor acts of help could prove to be life-changing for the participant.

4. The emotional toll

Fieldwork is an emotionally charged process that is very much personal in nature (England, 1994). Being emotionally burdened is common among qualitative researchers, both because of the challenges involved in the process and from failures to help participants in distress due to various limitations, including but not limited to money, time, institutional rules, and in extreme cases, surveillance by state agencies like the FBI (Marcus and Curtis, 2016; Mitchell and Irvine, 2008; Moore, 2009). However, in this section, I focus on two aspects of emotional burden, a) the feeling of incompetence and/or guilt, and b) a lack of a plan to deal with them both in the field and afterwards.

When put in the difficult position of denying help to research participants for various reasons, researchers often go through feelings of incompetence and develop a sense of guilt. While the feeling of incompetence may arise from the researcher’s limited resources and individual limitations, a sense of guilt may ascend when a researcher is exposed to extreme violence in their participant’s lives yet is not able to do anything about it (DeLuca and Maddox, 2016; Huisman, 2008; Kaplan et al., 2020). Such a sense of guilt often lasts even after the research is over,

resulting in the researcher's alienation (Calgaro, 2015). Many have attributed inexperience and a lack of preparation as the primary causes for emotional distress (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008; Johnson and Clarke, 2003; Malacrida, 2007). This brings us to the second aspect of having a plan to deal with emotional overlaps and reflect on those. In discussing her vulnerability and not being able to anticipate the emotional burdens, Sarah Stahlke put it, "When my issues arose, I had no plan for dealing with them and very few places to turn for support" (Stahlke, 2018, p. 8). A rigorous preparation, an assessment of risks and expectations, and being realistic before commencing the project could help minimize emotional distress (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008). Debriefing with the research assistant or co-investigators has been proved to be effective during the fieldwork in many cases (Stahlke, 2018). Specific trainings and informal supports from family, friends and colleagues could help dealing with emotional overlaps once the project is over (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008). However, the most significant gap in this respect remains the lack of support offered by the institutions in ensuring the well-being of qualitative researchers as part of occupational health and safety. One way of accomplishing this would be to seriously consider "embedding researcher well-being into the expectations of ethics boards and funders and into organizational policy" (Stahlke, 2018, p. 8).

5. Uneven and/or limited immersion

The purpose of this brief review is not to offer a definite answer to the ethical dilemma of whether to help or not to help research participants. Perhaps, such a solution is not possible, and neither is desirable, considering that ethnographic fieldwork is a dynamic process where different factors are into play at different lengths (Krause, 2021). This often hinges around the field researcher's ability to judgment as the European Commission research ethics guideline put it, "The field researcher's problem is to make a 'live' estimate whether an acceptable balance of harm and benefit is being achieved. And the judgement of the balance of harm and benefit frequently has to be taken in a dynamic, changing situation" (AcSS, 2013, p. 16). Further, we must also recognize that many dynamics and dilemmas cannot be handled solely by the researcher's skills and perseverance. Thus, as researchers, we need to keep our minds open for what Jana Krause understands as uneven and limited immersions (Krause, 2021). Limited immersions could particularly be helpful in cases where the researcher engages with a vulnerable population that shares a history of being exposed to extreme violence and marginalization as it facilitates shorter research stays and longer breaks between exposures to the field. Such immersions, on the one hand, allow the researcher enough time to reflect on their decisions regarding whether and how to help a participant in need and, on the other, a window to manage their own emotional overlaps. Uneven immersion is the varying degrees of access, rapport, and depth of relationships that a researcher must be ready to accept with different groups and individuals. These moments, if used skillfully, could be a valuable tool in the researcher's toolbox in avoiding a false impression of friendship and from creating a "friendly façade" (Huisman, 2008; Reinhartz, 1984). However, it must be cautioned that varying degrees of entanglement should not be used and viewed yet another tool to ignore the ethical question of "help" but to better equip the researcher in deciding whether and how to "help."

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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