



# 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.

**TASK:** Read the extract below - and answer the questions on the final page

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### **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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> 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*<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.”

<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> 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.

### **QUESTIONS**

1. Sultana describes a range of different ways that she connected, or didn't connect, with her research participants. Which were most important to her?
2. Having read this, would it affect how you read the rest of the paper? If so, how and if not, why not?
3. The task from the next block asks you to carry out research with fellow students. How might your positionality shape this research? What would be the advantages of this insider research, and what are the disadvantages?