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Doing research in the Global South: Exploring research ethics and their transformative potential

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Leonie Tuitjer

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Leonie Tuitjer

DOING RESEARCH IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH – EXPLORING RESEARCH ETHICS AND THEIR TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL

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Abstract

At the conference on ‘Spatial Transformation: Processes, Concepts and Research Designs’, a number of local and regional case studies from spatial research were presented alongside research papers about transformation processes conducted in the so-called Global South. This short article offers a reflection on the role of research ethics and their potentially transformative power within such contexts. First, the article argues that within research projects conducted by researchers from the so-called Global North in the Global South, a critical self-reflection of ones’ own position is necessary, as the researcher will inevitably be confronted with various ethical, logistical, and political challenges. Second, it is argued that it is precisely these challenges that enable critical self-reflection and the development of a transformative potential at the personal, institutional, project and output level. Research on spatial transformations may benefit from such *ethico-political* moments as those proposed by the social scientist Vinay Gidwani to achieve a deeper level of ethical self-reflection and perhaps a transformation on the level of knowledge production.

Keywords

Research ethics – transformative potential – Global South – power relations

1 Introduction

‘No geographer should travel South without careful deliberation of what it means to be a “privileged western researcher” in a postcolonial field’
(Griffiths 2017: 2).

The realisation that research is not neutral and that science is located in a context of social power relations is probably one of the most important insights of current social

research. For example, the connections between science and (the abuse of) power during the Second World War are indisputable. In this case, the production of knowledge – justified by ideology – was placed above basic ethical principle of human dignity. In more recent times, too, power has repeatedly been abused in the name of research, as in the case of the dubious series of tests on HIV positive patients in the US (von Unger 2014: 19). Because of these incidents, various disciplines, particularly in Anglo-Saxon countries, have imposed strict ethical rules which are monitored in the corresponding institutionalised committees. The research principle of ‘informed consent’ (ibid.), which guarantees that participation in research projects is voluntary and on the basis of the most comprehensive information possible, forms an important core component of research ethics, which in some countries (e.g. the UK) also has a clear legal dimension.

Alongside these important, legally defined principles of research ethics, this article also addresses a somewhat different form of research ethics, which sees itself primarily as serving the objective of (self-)reflection as good scientific practice. This is because critical reflection on social power relations is particularly powerful not just within human medicine or psychology, where test series and experiments can have direct physical consequences for the participants, but also within the social sciences and humanities, which require a careful reflection on ethical norms and principles in order to protect research participants from negative consequences. I will therefore be speaking in this article of reflexive research ethics which goes beyond purely legal questions and demands critical self-reflection in the tradition of post-colonial studies. Particularly in contexts in which Western researchers conduct research in the so-called Global South (referred to below simply as the Global South), questions of research ethics are particularly acute due to historical dependencies and repression (e.g. colonialism) which have repercussions to this day.

At this juncture, it should be pointed out that the chosen term ‘Global South’ is controversial. Firstly, the term does not reflect the actual geographical circumstances by which global differences (e.g. economic, social, political) manifest themselves. Secondly, the term originates in a problematic, binary division of the world into a ‘Global North’ and a ‘Global South’. This dichotomous thinking inevitably emphasises the differences between global regions instead of considering their commonalities. Furthermore, a binary division leaves almost no room for nuanced observations (Korf/Rothfuß 2016: 164).

Nevertheless, the term is used to a great extent in social sciences research (and also within critical discussions and in the programme of the conference on which this article is based). The urban geographer Colin McFarlane (2010) described his unease with the term, but still ascertained that the categories ‘Global South’ / ‘Global North’ were to a certain extent ‘stubborn’ (McFarlane 2010: 728). Despite their controversial nature, these terms remain anchored in parlance and are helpful in communicating content – albeit in an abridged form – to non-experts. The stubbornness of these categories is probably also based on the lack of alternatives. The controversial terms are used here for two reasons. Firstly, there are no convincing alternative terms which are less politicising. Older terms such as ‘developing country’ or ‘third world’ are both historically and politically charged. A manner of speaking which refers only to ‘regional

differences’ remains too vague and general and, furthermore, can conceal inequalities and historical developments rather than identifying them. Secondly, this article aims precisely to strengthen reflection about the difficult research conditions in ‘non-Western’ countries, which are often influenced by colonialism. In public and academic discourse, these complex historical interrelationships are often associated with the term ‘Global South’, and this convention – which, as mentioned above, is problematic – is followed here for greater ease of understanding. In this case, too, references to purely ‘regional’ configurations might be more likely to conceal power relations than to address them. However, the author is aware of the problems with the term, even though she is not able to offer a more suitable one at this point.

Since Edward Said’s analysis of the knowledge and power relations between Western and non-Western cultures, it has been undisputed that scholars in the humanities and cultural studies, but also geographers and ethnologists, function as important accomplices in upholding power structures. In *Orientalism* (1979), Said examined various disciplines and their methods with regard to their contribution to the production and upholding of social power structures in the colonial era. The *postcolonial turn* (Berndt/Pütz 2007; Young 2012), which was characterised by Said and subsequently developed in various ways, produced important reflexive impulses for the humanities and social sciences. Research is understood to be part of the *postcolonial turn* if it examines the after-effects of the colonial era from a cultural or social sciences perspective. Here, it is important to show the intensity with which the colonial past continues to have an impact, both in former colonies and in the centres of the various colonial empires. Particularly in geography, as one of the oldest spatial sciences, the *postcolonial turn* encompasses a critical examination of the colonial roots of the subject, since geographers, with their work in dating and mapping, were at the head of colonial research enterprises in the name of the various colonial empires (Livingstone 1992: 170; Griffiths 2017: 4).

This essay offers a brief reflection on the special challenges of the work and research undertaken by academics from the Global North in the Global South. The focus is on whether and how stricter, more self-critical reflection and research ethics can be seen as forms of transformative potential within the political economy of research. Particularly in moments of rupture and challenges in the research process, it is important to develop an ethico-political position. It is precisely in this development of a position that I see the transformative potential of research ethics, which can unfold at the institutional, personal, project and output level.

2 The political economy of knowledge

‘[It is within] capitalist circuits of knowledge, where those who control means of production – credentialized northern researchers – profit most heavily’
(Gidwani 2008: 236).

The US social scientist Vinay Gidwani, who works in the tradition of political ecology and deals in particular with India's colonial past and the post-colonial after-effects of this era, ascertained self-critically that academic work in the Global South is embedded in a series of inequalities which mostly favour the researchers from the Global North. According to the author, research, just like all other economic value creation chains, is embedded in a political economy of spatial inequality. In order for knowledge to be identified as a usable good, according to Gidwani, an international translation and transport process for the raw data is required in order to assign them a value as knowledge products: 'To count as "knowledge", information must be moved from the peripheries to a metropolitan location and be given recognizable form within prevailing disciplinary protocols and debates' (Gidwani 2008: 236). Raw data must, therefore, not just be translated into science or academic knowledge by methodological and theoretical processes but also be transported from their local context to privileged locations of knowledge production in order to achieve visibility and thus an economic value within the political economy of global knowledge production.

A similar argument can also be found in Griffiths' reflection about the continuing supremacy of Western research institutions: 'We cannot claim to have made a committed attempt to provincialise Europe in the processes of knowledge production' (Griffiths 2017: 5). The European, Australian and North American university landscape today remains the undisputed centre of knowledge production (in the social and spatial sciences). Theories and methods that are formed here, in particular, continue to have a dominant status and are essential in the process of translation of information into scientific output. According to Gidwani, the transport paths of this information or raw data from the Global South to the university metropolises of the Global North have proven historically to be extremely stable and confirm the geographic inequalities already criticised by Said in the context of colonial knowledge production. Accordingly, a reflection on questions of research ethics is necessary, particularly in post-colonial contexts and in research situations in the Global South, in which socio-economic inequalities between researchers and research participants have historical roots.

What possibilities do we, as researchers, now have to locate ourselves critically in this political economy of knowledge production? Which moments within field research can help us to initiate a more self-critical reflection and to address the power relations on which our research is so often based, and perhaps even to change them?

2.1 The *ethico-political* moment of field research

If field research in the Global South is therefore characterised by an unequal political economy, Gidwani also shows that these processes never run smoothly or without complications. It is precisely in these frictions, challenges and ruptures that Gidwani sees the decisive moment of the 'ethicopolitical' (Gidwani 2008: 236), which can present an opportunity for critical self-reflection and therefore also for a potential transformation of the unequal relationships: 'The ethicopolitical marks zones of liminality where the prior certitudes of theories and methodologies are confronted by demands that cannot be anticipated or resolved a priori. As scholars we encounter the

liminal at various junctures: when formulating a research problem, during fieldwork, and when translating field research into written products' (Gidwani 2008: 236). It is therefore precisely these zones of ambiguity and indeterminacy in which Gidwani sees the potential of giving ethical reflections a political dimension.

In Gidwani's example, the author searched in vain for access to an archive in India for his research about the complex and often contradictory emergence of an Indian working class during the British colonial period. The rejection and denial of access to the archive which he experienced provoked one of the ruptures and pressure points in Gidwani's research which were necessary for ethico-political reflection. Although this refusal initially brought about a crisis in his research work and jeopardised the whole research project – and thus ultimately also the academic value creation chain – the moment was nonetheless significant for critical self-reflection about his own demands, expectations and positioning in the research context (Gidwani 2008: 237).

This frustration within the research project brought the first real opportunity to reflect on his own position and on others' perceptions of it. His own self-image as a critical social scientist with the expectation of honouring the Indian working class through his own research was productively shaken by the rejecting attitude of the archive employee. This *ethico-political* moment enabled both global and local power relations to be experienced afresh and to therefore become the object of reflection. Gidwani's further analysis of the situation makes it clear that it was only at this point that he was able to experience a deeper understanding of local hierarchies and historical injuries, not only theoretically but also emotionally/affectively. His own research was strongly influenced by this.

Ethico-political moments, then, seem to happen precisely when researchers are faced with complex challenges of location and encounter intersectionally situated people in their research projects. It would not be at all correct or useful to describe all research projects in the Global South as *researching down*, in which power structures are structured in a one-sided, hierarchical manner (Sekuler 2014: 91). That is made clear here: 'Travelling South and doing ethnography now means, rightly, engagement with complex (and sometimes contradictory) perspectives on privilege and difference' (Griffiths 2017: 4). As in the example mentioned, difference and privileges are not static but rather context-dependent and dynamic. At this point, it is important to emphasise that the intention is not to question Gidwani's relative position of privilege, but to consider the importance of developing a differentiated understanding of power and hierarchies in the research context. The binary division into Global South/Global North, as already explained in the introduction, should not keep academics from reflecting intersectionally on social positions. Thus, developing an ethical position within this complex process of situatedness can indeed also take on a political dimension. But how do these moments help to transform our research? What potential can research ethics offer in such complex situations?

2.2 Exploring research ethics and their transformative potential

In the following, three levels will be briefly outlined in which ethical reflections can contribute to a transformation of the research process. These reflections will be concretised by three personal experiences which became *ethico-political* moments during my own field research for my doctorate work in Bangkok.

My PhD thesis investigated how people in Bangkok experience climate changes and the adaptation strategies that they develop. It was particularly relevant for me to take a differentiated look at the small-scale, temporary movement and flight patterns with which Bangkok's cosmopolitan inhabitants reacted to the floods in 2011. Local contexts, social networks, socio-economic positions, historical urban development and infrastructure, as well as the relationship between city inhabitants and political institutions played a decisive role here. In the course of this research project, I spent six months in the Thai capital and conducted over 30 qualitative interviews with various urban residents (urban refugees from Sri Lanka, residents of informal canal settlements, environmental activists, UN employees, employees of the municipal and national government, and academics), ethnographic observations and what were known as *walk-along interviews*. The complexity of the different positions of the research participants became clear here.

As well as the challenge of dealing appropriately with the heterogeneity of the research participants, von Unger emphasised: 'Questions of research ethics are an immanent component of empirical research practice and are raised in all phases of the research process – from the choice of topic and objective to the study design, access to the field, the data capture and evaluation process, up to questions of publication and the application of research results' (von Unger 2014: 16). Similarly to Gidwani, then, von Unger emphasises that questions of research ethics repeatedly crop up in the research process and cannot be conclusively settled in advance. The examples from my own research also occurred at different points in the research process.

Particularly in Anglo-Saxon countries, research ethics are regulated by ethics committees, as mentioned previously. These institutional mechanisms certainly cannot replace ethical reflection during field work, and they cannot cover all the challenges in advance; however, they do help to prepare for difficult situations and to develop a feeling for the types of inequality between researchers and participants that may occur and how they might be solved. An ethics commission thus stimulates one's own process of reflexivity and supports this by encouraging researchers to address questions of difference, privileges, vulnerability and inequality even before beginning their field work (von Unger/Narimani/M'Bayo 2014: 12).

As shown in the example above, these reflections encompass much more than the researcher's own research process. Ecological consequences also had to be considered, which argues for a holistic view of academic research as part of a political economy of knowledge production. Accordingly, research is not only rarely value-neutral but also rarely CO₂-neutral. Ethical responsibility for one's own research therefore also extends to this level, which goes far beyond one's own research horizon.

The institutional level

The ethics committee at the University of Durham in England, where I did my doctorate, not only raised questions before my research journey concerning the research participants, my personal situatedness and the ethical challenges of the methods I had selected (interviews, ethnographic observations), but also demanded an assessment of the ecological consequences of my working methods. Flights, paper consumption, and local transport options were discussed. In this instance, research ethics therefore referred not just to responsible interaction with other people, but also with the planet. I was prepared for this reflection in the methodology courses in my Masters programme, which had embedded research ethics as a central component of the teaching content. While we attended courses on topics such as ethnography as well as on qualitative and quantitative research methods during the three trimesters of the Masters programme, all these courses contained a reflection on the ethical challenges of the individual methods. The Thai state also demanded an application and ethical reflections on my research before I was allowed to work in Bangkok.

My PhD project was also subjected to an ethical review by the Thai state, which has an interest in the protection of its population and resources. However, the military coup of 2014 and the continuing human rights violations (Chachavalpongpun 2014; Farrelly 2016) made this condition an ethical challenge. On the one hand, I felt that it was legitimate for the Thai authorities to demand my research application. The form I had to fill out made it clear that the state's predominant concern was protection against biopiracy in the name of research, since the conditions were considerably stricter for teams working in the natural sciences. On the other hand, I felt obliged to exercise particular caution when citing organisations and persons whom I wanted to interview, since I wanted to protect the right to anonymity of my research participants in all cases. Research projects can thus lead to reflections about political realities and authoritarian regimes, even if the actual object of the research is something else. Even in this case, an ethical positioning is also inevitably political and necessary.

To summarise, this example addresses various dimensions in which reflection should be understood to be part of research ethics which can achieve a transformative potential at the institutional level. In order to encourage students and young researchers towards self-critical reflection on their work and towards a positioning in the research field (regardless of whether this is in the Global South, among international elites or even in other (spatial/social) peripheries), increasing the share of this subject in methodological teaching surely makes sense. Furthermore, at the institutional level, reflection on the introduction of ethics committees would set a helpful impulse for the continued promotion of a broader dialogue about the (social) responsibility of research. At the same time, however, it should be borne in mind that this form of institutionalised control can constitute a problem if democratic principles and rules of play are not observed.

The personal/project level

During my field research, I was initially very concerned that, because of my 'outsider role', I could run the risk of (mis)representing research participants, of not completely understanding local contexts, and of speaking for or even about the 'Other' in my research without letting them speak for themselves in sufficient detail. It was all the more important to me to repeatedly seek out essential commonalities between the participants and myself during the interviews and ethnographic observations, and thus to gradually find a position in which I was less conscious of differences than motivated by commonalities. In this *ethico-political* learning process, it was indeed possible to approach the ideal of doing research at the level of equals. In such moments, the (real and sometimes perhaps only imagined) differences between me and the research participants disappeared, and the process of research automatically became much more dialogical and participatory than I had hoped for at the start. This not only resulted in a personal transformation but also enriched the project with new dimensions.

The institutional level also produces transformations on the personal and project level. Reflexivity at the cognitive level is often discussed in methodological literature against the academic background of securing methods. Reflexivity is seen here as an important epistemological basis for further cognitive processes (von Unger 2014: 24) and is therefore significant for the merit and quality of the results. Accordingly, the task of research ethics and of a reflexive attitude at this cognitive level would be primarily to enable and enrich findings in the social sciences (ibid.). This is undoubtedly an important element of qualitative research in the social sciences.

However, the transformative potential of reflexive research ethics is not just understood here at the cognitive level described but also includes affective and emotional components of personal development. In the above-mentioned example, this emotional/affective transformation was evident, for example, when initially presumed differences between research participants and the researcher were overcome and a common understanding of similarities and connection was possible. In this context, reflexive research ethics encompasses a continuous examination of the categories and assumptions which determine our research, but also our everyday orientations. Dichotomies between the self/other, Global North/Global South can be rethought through this reflexivity and may be overcome. Particularly for subsequent research projects, such experiences can be enriching and also contribute on a personal level to a deeper understanding (and potential countering) of hierarchies.

At the personal/project level, the transformative potential of reflexive research ethics therefore consists of an ideally continuous process of critical self-questioning and the continuing willingness to learn lessons from this for new research paths.

Output level

At this point, I can only report of personal failure due to my own expectations. During my field research, I attempted to develop alternative output formats; because of the limited time in the field and the lack of institutional affiliation, however, this was almost impossible. Particularly during the research visits to informal canal settlements in Bangkok, because of language barriers (I was dependent on the assistance of translators), it was extremely difficult to document joint results in a way that would have enriched the community in a meaningful way. During my field research, I was also working as a volunteer for six months with a group of refugees from Sri Lanka and Pakistan and was able to recruit friends here to take over my role as English teacher before my departure. Although this would probably not be evaluated as an ‘output’ in the strictly academic sense, this form of continuity creation may perhaps be evaluated as an attempt in which I, as a researcher, was able to give something back to the participants.

The third and last selected level, the output level, once again makes the opportunities and challenges of a transformative research aspiration particularly clear. Short stays in the field, inadequate institutional support and connection with the research participants, and diverse financial constraints, in addition to personal limitations, can make it harder to enable creative forms for the results at the output level. In particular, the ideal of enabling research participants to partake in an added value through their own work often seems impossible.

Although, as described above, this ideal is therefore often difficult to achieve, it is precisely the participatory and creative research methods which sometimes lead to forms of academic output which can supplement or even replace traditional academic articles. In the programme of the conference on which this article is based, ‘Spatial transformation: processes, strategies and research design’, there were a few papers which used the form of a research laboratory, for example. The aim of a research laboratory is to test new methods and approaches in a creative and experimentally open way. Kagan/Hauerwaas/Holzetal. (2018) see these real laboratories as important *spaces of possibility* for learning from and with each other. At these spaces of possibility, new visions for a shared future can be tested (Kagan/Hauerwaas/Holz et al. 2018: 42). Particularly in countries of the Global South, such a method can be useful in order to avoid research hierarchies and make the research results directly accessible to the participants.

Such a change in the academic output can, in some cases, also contribute to transforming the political economy of science addressed by Gidwani. He himself writes on this topic: ‘The researcher may start to ask what it would mean to write with a primary commitment to extra-academic social use-values that diverge from – even actively reject – the circuits of exchange and academic reward’ (Gidwani 2008: 237 et seq.). Particularly in the case of research in the Global South, outputs that

are not subject to a strict academic form may therefore be a lot more meaningful than an article in a journal which is difficult to access (and may also be difficult to understand).

3 Conclusions

Alongside institutionally protected norms of research ethics such as informed consent, ethical reflections in the research process also seem to be indispensable in a research context in which academics from the Global North are active in the Global South. Historical and continuing inequalities and privileges require a sensitive handling of differences and a careful seeking out of commonalities. Reflexive research ethics which confronts the complexity of the intersectional situatedness of research participants and researchers can provide an important contribution to this.

It seems useful to me in this context to take up the idea of ethico-political moments and processes in research. It is precisely at these points of rupture that the critical juxtapositions and frictions may occur which are necessary in order to become aware of the further transformative potential of research ethics. An ethical position here is more of a continual process, since self-reflection means continual work and is not definitively achievable from the outset. Particularly with regard to the conference programme on which this volume of the ARL Publication Series is based, research ethics can make a contribution to 'transformative research which is oriented towards specific social problems and offers participation opportunities for the most diverse stakeholders' (see the ARL/TRUST conference programme online), by enriching precisely this transformative research to include an ethico-political element of critical self-reflection. In specific terms, this means both cultivating a high level of self-reflection and developing a critical eye for intersectional differences – and commonalities.

Finally, it should be pointed out that many of the statements made and examples selected here may conceal the fact that researchers from the Global North are equally situated in intersectionally differentiated positions. The increasing neoliberalisation of the Western research landscape means that, in particular, doctoral students and postdocs who are not yet established may find themselves in precarious employment situations which are not given differentiated consideration here. Research is rarely equipped with the resources for which the researchers would wish. Stipends may end prematurely, funding cannot be raised, or resources are cut. These are all components which considerably impede one's own positioning within the political economy of knowledge production and in some cases impede the feasibility (particularly at the output level) of certain ethically desirable methods and principles. A reflection of one's own positioning in the research context therefore includes a critical exploration of the circumstances, practical constraints, institutional requirements and hindrances which are also (re)produced in the Global North and should also become the object of transformation and rethinking here.

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