The Ethical Vacuum in Fieldwork:
Ethical and political concerns regarding the treatment of
fieldworkers and respondents in the conduct of fieldwork
in the era of globalisation

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Research Report No. 60

2003

Abstract

This paper is interested in the ethical and political issues relating to the relationship between the researcher and the fieldworker. Specifically, it argues that, since the relationship between the researcher and fieldworker is not governed by ethical principles nor by labour laws, the fieldworker finds him or herself at the mercy of the researcher. Since fieldworkers mostly rely on intermittent employment, they tend not to be in a position to bargain for the type of work they do and the conditions under which they do it and are, thus, vulnerable to abuse by researchers. The paper further argues that the manner in which fieldworkers are treated is related to the politics of fieldwork in development research; i.e. the role of race and privilege in the treatment of fieldworkers and respondents as well in the conduct of fieldwork.
Introduction

Researchers are often admonished against various pitfalls in planning, designing and executing research projects as well as on the hazards in analysing and reporting research findings. Such admonitions relate only to the treatment of 'research subject'. This is so because the assumption is that the researcher works on his or her own and that the only person to be protected against the researcher is the 'research subject'. However, over the years, researchers have been hiring the services of 'informants', 'knowledgeable persons', 'research assistants' or simply 'fieldworkers' to carry out various tasks central to the research project. Such tasks include, but are not limited to, the identification of research sites, identification of suitable research 'subjects', conducting interviews, conducting focus group discussions, translations from the researcher's preferred language to the language of the respondents and back, and the contextualisation of the research and research questions as well as responses to such questions. While doing all this work, the fieldworker is not considered as an employee. Therefore, during the duration of the study, he or she is at the mercy of the researcher.

This paper is interested in the relationship between the researcher or research organisation and the fieldworker in the process of collecting and analysing data. Specifically, I am interested in two issues; one, what happens to the fieldworker when the relationship is not governed by over-arching and enforceable ethical principles nor protected by labour legislation. And, two, the political issues informing the treatment of fieldworkers as well as issues raised by the manner in which fieldworkers are treated and fieldwork conducted.

Method

The information on which the comments and arguments in this paper are based was collected over a period of 6 years between 1994 and 2000. During this
period, I worked in various capacities in urban and rural development projects around the country.¹ In most such projects, the participation of fieldworkers was the essential method of data collection. The initial purpose of collecting the information on which this paper is based was an attempt to understand the lives of the people we call fieldworkers so that I and the consultancy in which I was a partner could develop a better policy of dealing with fieldworkers. Each time we engaged in work that required the participation of fieldworkers, I would have daily sessions of debriefing with the fieldworkers before and after they went out to 'the field'. Some of the information I gathered was used in guiding our organisation when dealing with fieldworkers.

Over the years the relationship I struck with the fieldworkers developed to a point where I learned more about their lives than is possible when they are only engaged as 'data collectors'. Many of these relationships exist to this day. With those who live far away from KwaZulu-Natal, I communicate, either over the phone or email, now and then. The experiences to which these people continue to be subjected, as fieldworkers, have a lot to do with the reasons for writing this paper. For the purposes of this paper, I have used discussion with eight of the fieldworkers, who comment on their own experiences and the experiences of fellow fieldworkers. Altogether, the experiences of 21 (twenty-one) fieldworkers inform the argument in the paper.

The major methodological difficulty of writing this paper is that I am addressing an issue that affects people who, for their own protection, cannot be named. Most fieldworkers are dependent on the income they get as fieldworkers and do not want to jeopardise their chances of continuing to get such work. In fact, many prefer not to talk about their known experiences as fieldworkers. Over and

¹ The areas in which I worked include but are not limited to Freedom Square, Namibia Square (Bloemfontein); Tamboville, Oukassie (Johannesburg); Soweto-on-Sea, Scenery Park (Eastern Cape); Wiggins, Cato Crest, Old Dunbar Road (Cato Manor); Bester, St. Wendolins, Chesterville, Lamontville, the Gunstone Ocean Action Study (Greater Durban); Shaka's Head and Itele (Dolphin Coast); Inanda Newtown (Inanda); and the Pietermaritzburg-Durban Corridor Study.
above this, and for obvious reasons, the organisations and people for whom the fieldworkers worked and continue to work cannot be named. Consequently, sometimes the time during which the event occurred is changed and, sometimes, the place is changed. In some cases, it was important to change the gender of the people concerned. Such changes are done while the events and their salience are maintained.

**Ethical considerations and treatment of respondents**

The literature on the ethics of research addresses the relationship between the researcher and the 'research subject'. (Babbie, (2001); Kotch, (2000); Bless & Higson-Smith, 1995; Judd *et al*, 1991). This is largely because the 'ethics committees' of various 'professional associations' are concerned with the treatment of 'human subjects' and mandate strict guidelines of how 'human subjects' should be dealt with. Among some of the concerns is the *deception* of 'research subjects' by researchers, *confidentiality* as well as the *protection* of 'research subjects' *from* direct and indirect physical and psychological *harm* which they may suffer as a result of their participation in research.

The literature on research ethics is silent on one of the major relationships that the researcher enters into in the process of conducting research. That is, the relationship with the *fieldworker*. This particular relationship is mostly left to the 'gentlemanly' understanding between the researcher and the *fieldworker*. While the researcher hires the *fieldworker* to carry out certain tasks for him or her for a particular duration of time, since the *fieldworker* is considered as a temporary worker (even though some are engaged for years), such relations are not governed by ethical principles nor protected by labour laws.² Consequently, the *fieldworkers* are exposed to various types of abuses.

² To be sure, recognising the potential problems in the relationship, some organisations have developed their own in-house principles of addressing the relationship between researchers and 'fieldworkers.' But, invariably, such principles are meant for the protection of the organisation and not for the interest of fieldworkers.'
This paper highlights various forms of such abuse. Most forms of abuse originate from the economic status of fieldworkers. The desperate economic conditions with which they are faced, primarily as a consequence of loss of employment opportunities due to globalisation, make it difficult for fieldworkers to turn down employment on the basis of poor working environments and low paying offers and it makes them unable to insist on humane treatment. The experiences of fieldworkers discussed below suggest that, the relationship between the researcher and the fieldworker requires some governance by ethical 'codes of conduct'.

The fieldworkers

In most cases, the concept fieldworker is in fact a misnomer. The people considered as fieldworkers perform various tasks, some of which may not be associated with 'fieldwork'. Among some of the tasks they are expected to perform, is to be interpreters, negotiators of access to households, to be translators and general facilitators of the interaction between the researcher and the 'research subject', who may be one person, a community or communities. Fieldworkers, in some cases, are expected to travel far away from home, sometimes staying for days away. The fact that such fieldworkers are men and women in their late twenties and thirties and some even in their forties, should suggest that they are old enough to have families of their own. But such considerations hardly ever affect the manner in which fieldworkers are treated and the demands made on them and their time.3

Although most fieldworkers tend to come from relatively urbanised areas, people with such experience exist in most areas of South Africa. They are hired through various networks of organisations or other fieldworkers. The experienced ones, with experiences ranging from five to fifteen years and more, are known to many researchers and have worked for many research organisations. The

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3. Perhaps this fact should not surprise us. After all, the history of South Africa is such that workers, particularly African workers, have been treated as though they did not have families. This is true of the mines, factories, and domestic service.
experienced ones are often taken on assignment across regional and even provincial borders. A few have been taken across the border to work in Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Zambia. They are, sometimes, recruited, on recommendations from domestic researchers, to work with visiting scholars and researchers from overseas.

**Treatment of fieldworkers**

Despite the apparent exciting engagements of *fieldworkers*, too often, their treatment leaves much to be desired. There are numerous ways in which *fieldworkers* are treated by researchers and research organisations or companies. Only issues relating to poor payment, safety and security as well as accommodation will be addressed here.

**Poor payment**

*Fieldworkers* are normally hired to do what is referred to as *fieldwork*; i.e. whatever needs to be done in the field. Such work ranges from interviews to conducting focus group discussions. On the basis of that understanding of their work, and for the researcher or research organisation to ensure that *fieldworkers* do their work, *fieldworkers* are paid per questionnaire for interviews (and they have to finish a certain number per day) and per hour for focus group discussions. Invariably, the researcher or research organisation decides the fees for questionnaires and focus group discussions. The *fieldworkers* have to "take it or leave it". Some of the researchers and research organisations are reputed for changing the fee per questionnaire in the middle of the project. And, since this is mostly the only kind of work they get and often go a long time without working, *fieldworkers* have no choice but to "take it".

Vinolia, who gets called to work on fieldwork for a research organisation in Bloemfontein, complains about the fact that she has been called by the same organisation for close to ten year to work as a fieldworker but she still gets paid the same rate as new
Fieldworkers are not only underpaid because the fee is chosen for them, they are underpaid because the work they do is unrecognized and undervalued. Anyone who has ever conducted an interview knows that it involves skills of approaching a person, properly explaining the purpose of the interview in the manner that the potential interviewee understands (this often means doing more than direct translation), getting the potential interviewee to agree to the interview and properly conducting the interview itself. The manner in which fieldworkers are paid and the tasks for which they are paid suggests that researchers and research organisations do not consider negotiations before the interview as work.

The fact that most fieldworkers are women is not unrelated to the low fees that fieldworkers get paid. Male workers are known for their gumption to demand hire pay and their willingness to go on strike to demand what they consider to be just pay. Researchers and research organisations understand this too well. Over time, they have reduced the numbers of male fieldworkers and increased the numbers of female fieldworkers. Male fieldworkers are only hired if there is work that female fieldworkers cannot do. One of the fieldworkers says that the organisation she normally works for used to give them T-shirts, which helped to identify them to the respondents. She says that since the organisation has ceased to hire men, the prices of T-shirts are deducted from fieldworkers' fees.

In sum, poor payment of ‘fieldworkers’ is indicated by the low rate of payment per questionnaire and by the fact that they receive no travel payment between their home and the researcher's office. It is exacerbated by the fact that they are sometimes forced to pay for research items such as T-Shirts and Hats or Caps.
Safety and security

Fieldworkers are exposed to various types of risks in the process of doing their work. This paper will discuss only three. First is the risk of being personally attacked. Such risks tend to be viewed lightly by researchers and research organisations. Consequently, fieldworkers are often sent to conduct interviews in dangerous neighbourhoods without much protection. In order to carry out their quota of interviews, they sometimes have to approach the designated house or shack in which there are men, a potential rape environment.

Jabulile, an experienced female fieldworker, tells of nightmares in which she knocks and opens a door into a room full of intoxicated men who grab her and force her onto a mattress on the floor. She normally wakes up sweating profusely, before anything could happen.

Owing to the potential of being raped, some female fieldworkers in Durban have devised ways of checking on each other and letting others know when each is going into a house. They ensure that the door is open during the interview. If the door is closed (sometimes the interviewee insists on this) one or two other fieldworkers approach the house, knock on the door and, if nothing is going on, let the fieldworker know that they are waiting for her outside. That message is supposed to be for the interviewee more than the fieldworker.

Some researchers and research organisations, instead of hiring vehicles for fieldworkers, tell fieldworkers to use public transport to get to and from interviews. Carrying valuable stationery on public transport is not considered to be a risk to the stationery and fieldworkers. In one occasion, near Johannesburg, fieldworkers were robbed at gunpoint, of their money, cellular phones, jewelry and research stationery, in broad daylight, while on the way to conducting interviews in an informal settlement. The fieldworkers did not report the robbery to the police and, as far as they know, the organisation they worked for did not report the matter either.
Second, and related to the first, is absence of insurance for fieldworkers.

On the way to conduct interviews, a fieldworker from a Durban township was injured when the vehicle in which she and other fieldworkers and the fieldwork manager were travelling overturned. Her injuries were such that she now needs to use either crutches or a stick to walk. The institution for which she was conducting interviews at the time refused to co-operate with her in claiming Third Party Insurance because, as she was told, ”Third Party Insurance only covers permanent members of staff”.

After that injury she could not continue with the interviews and could not find similar work for a long time.

Third, is the fact that fieldworkers are not provided with counseling when they are exposed to emotionally challenging situations.

Jabu once found himself as the first person to whom a respondent confided his HIV status. The respondent had recently found out about his HIV status and had not and could not tell his relatives and partner. In the process of the interview, the tearful respondent started inquiring about how long he had to live; about his fear of dying; about his fears of what was to happen to his young children since, because he was unemployed, he had nothing to bequeath to them and other related issues. Jabu found himself having to provide counseling and was emotionally drained at the end of the incomplete interview. He still cannot discuss the incident without his voice cracking.

Jabu reported the incident to his fieldwork manager. He was told to refer such respondents to qualified people and not to 'deal with them' himself. The fact that Jabu was faced with providing some kind of solace in the face of the outpouring of grief was not considered. No counseling was provided for him despite being in what he considers to have been an "agitated state".

In sum, when they embark on fieldwork, 'fieldworkers' expose themselves to being personally attacked and to being injured without compensation because they are not permanent members of research organisations. The also expose
themselves to emotionally challenging situations without proper counseling before and after the interviews.

**Accommodation**

Normally, when *fieldworkers* are engaged to conduct interviews away from their hometown and have to stay elsewhere for sometime, accommodation is rented for them. However, since *fieldworkers* are one of the most undervalued actors in the research process, often the cheapest form of accommodation is rented for them. Under normal circumstances, such decisions would be taken as financial prudence. But, since the 'fieldwork managers' are normally rented the top of the range accommodation, it is difficult to accept that the decision for renting inferior accommodation is due to financial prudence.

Normally, accommodation comes with breakfast and supper. But, sometimes, researchers or research organisations prefer to provide *fieldworkers* their own less expensive breakfast and dinner.

Some *fieldworkers* who spent a week away from home running focus groups on the prevalence of HIV/AIDS were given brown bread with jam for breakfast and 'fish and chips' for supper for the whole week. The fieldwork manager would buy a number of loaves of bread and tins of jam and then expect bread and jam to last a whole week.

Another organisation is reputed for providing *fieldworkers* with maize meal and expect that the *fieldworkers* would take turns making porridge in the morning.

Often, while the 'fieldwork managers' who, according to *fieldworkers*, "spend time shopping or on the beach" are provided with "lunch money" over and above 'bread and breakfast', *fieldworkers*, who sometimes have to walk for miles looking for respondents, are either expected to provide themselves with lunch or are given "cold sandwiches and squash". One of the 'fieldwork managers', an African woman working for a research organisation, is reputed to tell *fieldworkers*
who protest against the Spartan meals, "You cannot expect us to provide you with better food than you get at home!"

From the foregoing discussion, it is clear that the lack of ethical considerations relating to the treatment of fieldworkers has resulted in fieldworkers being subjected to abusive working conditions. For many researchers and research organisations, fieldworkers have become the financial shock absorbers during these times of globalisation and enforced 'fiscal discipline'. Their treatment is not unrelated to the fact that most fieldworkers are African women. This is the issue, among others, that the following section addresses.

In sum, 'fieldworkers' are provided with poor accommodation while others are provided the best available accommodation. Also, the diet provided for the 'fieldworkers' leaves a lot to be desired.

The Politics of Development Research

It is understandable that fieldworkers, as casual labour, will suffer the fate of most contract workers in similar circumstances. That is, periodic employment and unemployment as well as the inability to bargain for better pay, working conditions and benefits. However, the working conditions of fieldworkers tell an interesting story about researchers and research organisations. While researchers and research organisations tender for projects aimed at 'poverty reduction', 'income generation', 'infrastructural development', 'socio-economic development' and many others, their treatment of fieldworkers belie the pious statements and 'commitments' stipulated in their proposals. If the level of commitment to such ideals is as demonstrated by the treatment of fieldworkers, it is no wonder that the reports produced have almost no impact on 'poverty reduction' and 'socio-economic development'.

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In fact, researchers and research organisations see the research process as consisting of two forms of labour; unskilled and skilled. The unskilled labour is the labour of African fieldworkers whose work is considered as not requiring much intellectual content. This is despite the intellectual challenges the fieldworkers encounter in the process of doing their work. The skilled labour is the labour of 'fieldwork managers', 'project co-ordinators', and 'project leaders'.

We turn now to these and other related issues.

**Race and the treatment of fieldworkers**

Fieldworkers are hired for their skills in fieldwork. For the most part, African fieldworkers are hired for such skills as well as for their ability to speak local languages. By and large, white and Indian researchers in South Africa have not concerned themselves about the need to learn African languages. Such proficiency is the least among the requirements for being an expert on anything in South Africa. Also, African fieldworkers are hired because researchers do not like to go into African areas. Yet numerous research reports and research articles are written by researchers who do not set foot in and, therefore have no appreciation of, areas about which they write.

A fieldworker from a township outside Schweizer Reneker reminded me of the time when our 'development team' got a rude awakening about the lack of running water and sanitation services in the area. As part of the team's 'getting to know the area' item, our team took a walk around the township in order to 'look, listen, smell and feel' the dynamics in the community. It so happened that the walk took place around the time that the sanitation truck came to pick up the overnight buckets. We did, indeed, 'look and smell' the community then. From that point, running water and sanitation issues were discussed with much appreciation and urgency.

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4. In the past, these groups comprised only white people. Lately, these groups have been joined by middle class Indians and Africans. According to fieldworkers, the treatment of fieldworkers by Indian and African 'fieldwork managers' is not better than that of their white counterparts. In fact some fieldworkers prefer white 'fieldwork managers'.

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The unwillingness to go into African areas is also informed by racial attitudes of the past. In the past, African areas were off-limit to most white people except state officials such as police and health workers. They were designated as disease infested and crime ridden places which had to be avoided by anyone who valued his or her life. Such thinking, together with the reluctance to learn to speak African languages, makes African areas remain off-limit to contemporary researchers. It is an interesting issue that the accuracy of the reports of such research is hardly ever questioned despite the fact that those responsible for the analysis took no part in such 'participatory research', particularly since fieldworkers are hardly ever acknowledged as participants in the research process.

The unwillingness to learn to speak African languages and to go into African areas is not unrelated to the socialisation of privileged South Africans. As a subjugated people, Africans were forced to learn the languages of the dominant groups and, at the time, the dominant group could manage without learning the languages of the dominated. It is the mark of the continued domination of Africans which makes it possible for people to become experts on Africans and African socio-economic, cultural and political systems without the ability to speak a single African language. Can you imagine an expert of English politics and culture who cannot speak English? Can you imagine the same for French, German, Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese, etc.?

In sum, some of the reasons that 'fieldworkers' are hired relate to the researcher's inability to speak local languages, their unfamiliarity with local cultures and customs as well as the reluctance by researchers to visit African areas.

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5. In the past, this group comprised mostly white people. Recently, other groups have been socialised into this practice.
6. It is a radical and radicalising experience for a member of the dominant group to learn and be proficient in the language of the dominated group, whether such learning is done for purposes of domination or not.
The myth of 'capacity development'

The management of fieldworkers by inexperienced people belies the promises made on research proposals regarding 'capacity building' and 'capacity development' of fieldworkers. While fieldworkers' African names are used in project proposals to fulfill the 'capacity development' requirements, no researcher or research organisation provides fieldworkers with any experience other than 'fieldwork', in which, in any case, they are competent before they are hired. It is a commentary to researchers' and research organisations' commitment to 'capacity development' that many experienced fieldworkers know nothing about research design, questionnaire design, sampling and analysis and not to mention the use of computers in these processes. Other than being asked to translate the interviews, fieldworkers are not given the opportunity to contribute towards the analysis of the interviews, even though their contribution may enrich the analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data.

Over and above the concerns mentioned above, fieldworkers find themselves in situations where they are 'managed' by young white women who are 'fieldwork managers'. While fieldworkers do not object to the colour, gender and age of 'fieldwork managers', they are concerned about being managed by people who seem to have less knowledge of the process of conducting interviews than they do and who have no knowledge of the areas in which the respondents live and the communities in which they live.

A group of fieldworkers from one of the major cities once spent half a day looking for a 'fieldwork manager' who had got lost in a rented car in a rural informal settlement.

Sometimes, in a situation reminiscent of the old job-reservation days, fieldworkers are requested to teach a young white woman the ins and outs of

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7. The fieldworkers refer to them as "white girls". Lately, middle class Indians and Africans have featured as 'fieldwork managers'.

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fieldwork. Once the young woman is considered proficient enough, she is made 'fieldwork manager' over people who taught her the job.

In sum, capacity development; management by inexperienced people; helping train 'fieldwork' managers.

**Race and the treatment of respondents**

The research ethics requirements that prescribe *informed consent*, *voluntary participation*, *confidentiality*, *anonymity*, *avoidance of deception* and *protection of respondents from harm*, are flouted routinely for both economic and political reasons. To meet the *informed consent* requirements, researchers and research organisation train *fieldworkers* to inform respondents about the survey and ask for permission to interview them. Invariably, respondents *verbally* agree to be interviewed.\(^8\) Three questions remain; i.e. whether *fieldworkers* provide all the information necessary for the respondent to make the appropriate decision (Veatch, 1982), whether they were not deceived into participating (Baumrind, 1981), and whether by agreeing to be interviewed, respondents also agree to what the researchers plan to do with the data.

The use of *fieldworkers* in data collection, for the mere fact that the primary researcher is not involved, makes it difficult for the researcher or research organisation to be sure that all participants in the project *voluntarily* opted to *participate*. This is particularly so for researchers and research organisations that do not properly train their *fieldworkers* and or do not hold post interview debriefings with *fieldworkers* and respondents.\(^9\) While there may be important special conditions for not debriefing respondents (Humphreys, 1975),

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\(^8\) It is informative that of the 8 experienced people who agreed to participate in this study, only one had ever heard of a *release form* - a document that protects the respondents intellectual property and other rights.

\(^9\) In fact, almost all the communities in which we have worked, complain about researchers and research organisations which consistently fail to communicate research findings, despite earnest promises to do so, during the project negotiation phase.
development researchers fail to debrief respondents and communities simply because either they cannot be bothered or debriefing becomes less important at the end of the project.

Who is responsible for ensuring that the information provided by the respondent is treated with confidence? Is it the researcher and the research organisation or is it the fieldworker? If it is the researcher or the research organisation, what is the respondent to make of having to divulge his or her secrets to a third party - the fieldworker? If the fieldworker promises the respondent that the information he or she provides would be treated with confidence, what should the respondent learn from such a promise? Does it mean that the information would not go beyond the fieldworker, the fieldworker and the researcher or research organisation (how many people is this?), or the fieldworker and whoever the fieldworker wants to give the information to? The unresolved uncertainty regarding issues of confidence is a clear indication that promises of treating information in confidence are made as a matter of course and not due to any commitment to the respect of respondent's confidentiality.

The same applies to ensuring the anonymity of respondents. By and large, this concept tends to be understood to mean that no one would be able to identify the respondents after the report has been written. It is understandable that interviews and various types of participatory formats make it difficult not to know who the respondents are. However, this rule is violated frequently during data collection. This is particularly so when the design requires the interview of couples or partners. Because such designs assume that couples are found in one place, they assume that if one partner agrees to an interview, the other partner would also. Many people have found themselves pressured to participate as respondents (i.e. participating involuntarily and their anonymity violated) in research projects because their partner had previously agreed and gave their name as the other half of the couple. Such designs are particularly common in the voyeuristic research on sexual behaviour in the era of HIV/AIDS.
In one area, a former partner used an old partner as reference. The old partner who was then in a new relationship was put in a position of having to explain to fieldworkers that the relationship had ended and of having to explain to the new partner who the old partner was and why she would still refer fieldworkers to him.

Research on HIV/AIDS has become the second 'pandemic' afflicting poor Africans (the people that every 'AIDS researcher' researches.) Forced to participate in research because of incentives such as groceries and valuable domestic items, they are made to discuss the most embarrassing aspects of their lives, particularly sexual lives, with strangers. Such invasion of privacy, in the Machiavellian sense of the 'end justifies the means', is excused in the name of furthering information which, presumably, would lead to informed policies on prevention and treatment. The objectification of respondents' lives and sexual lives, in a country still immersed in racial classification, constipates the consumers of 'research findings' and, through various political laxatives, gets released and discussed as the practices of all Africans.\textsuperscript{10}

\textbf{Where are the white people?}

The interesting fact about many research projects in South Africa is the lack of attention to the socio-economic conditions of white people. While it was understandable, as a political strategy, that research in the past focused on Africans, there are less justifications for the continuation of such practice after 1994. For political reasons, it was necessary in the past to expose the social and economic conditions of African life to the whole country in order to defeat the policy of 'separate development'. Since the then government ensured basic economic conditions for white people, the lives of white people did not feature very much in research projects. Most non-state funding was issued specifically

\textsuperscript{10} Is it any wonder that all Africans are considered to be promiscuous and, therefore, infected with HIV/AIDS? That all African men are considered to be potential rapists, that all security personnel consider all Africans to be potential shoplifters, thieves, robbers, burglars and car-jackers?
to conduct research among Africans. There was minimal funding for conducting research among white people.

However, the conditions have now changed. While white people still, by and large, live comfortable lives, there is a rapidly growing number of poor white people who have fallen off the social ladder and eke out a miserable living invisible to most researchers. Is it not better that an understanding of the socio-economic dynamics of such people's lives be undertaken sooner rather than later? Is it not better to attempt to address the high rates of alcoholism among this group, the high rate of family break-ups and the consequent prevalence of school drop-out rates (especially among boys), the prevalence of drug abuse, the tendency for violence? Are members of this group not eligible for the allocation of government housing like other South Africans? Is it not important to find the prevalence of HIV/AIDS among this group?

The foregoing questions cannot be adequately answered because researchers have chosen to ignore the alarming growth of white people living on the margins of society. Some of this neglect is still along the lines of past neglect. But, the types of research and the kinds of questions asked, particularly in the era of HIV/AIDS, seem to suggest that, besides the fact that their agenda is set by funding agencies and donors, researchers are not as comfortable asking invasive questions to white people as they are to asking such questions to Africans. It appears that it is not as easy for them to objectify white people as they do Africans. Quite often, when such questions are raised, they are easily dismissed with the reply, "the prevalence of HIV/AIDS among white people is negligible". But, how do we know this, without conducting proper research? And, how do we know it when many white people do not attend public hospitals and clinics where HIV/AIDS testing on pregnant mothers is conducted?

To be sure, sometimes the failure to conduct research among white people is due to the inaccessibility of white people, particularly the middle and upper
classes. Barricaded behind high electric fences, guarded by armed men and man-eating dogs, middle and upper class white people are beyond the reach of fieldworkers.\(^{11}\) The most persistent of researchers sets appointments with the residents behind the electric fences and sends the fieldworkers at a specified day and time - a courtesy that is not afforded Africans whose lives are interrupted by fieldworkers who show up unannounced.\(^{12}\) But the manner in which research is conducted in South Africa is such that such courtesy is accorded well-to-do people and not poor people.

While the post 1994 researchers treat with disdain the Africans who demand what is rightfully theirs and have coined derogatory terms such as sense of entitlement to refer to people who insist on their share, they are oblivious of the sentiments of deprivation which lead some to flee the country, to barricade themselves in inaccessible neighbourhoods and produces inexplicable demonstrations of brutality among others.

This section has argued that race plays a major part in the treatment of fieldworkers, respondents and in deciding on the target population and the kinds of interactions the researcher or fieldworkers have with the respondent. The focus of research on poor African people has objectified the conditions of African existence and practice and has resulted in derogatory categorisation of their struggle for rightful recognition as entitlement. The neglect of research on white people obscures conditions similar to those of Africans and has resulted in the non-recognition of the sentiments of deprivation that consume many and inform their actions.

\(^{11}\) Fieldworkers mention numerous research projects that were completed without white residents of neighbourhoods having been interviewed because access to their houses was difficult. This is despite the fact that interviews with such people had been an essential part of such research.

\(^{12}\) The fact that the researcher or research organisation discusses the project with 'community leaders' does not absolve the researcher or research organisation of the obligation to make appointments with prospective respondents.
Summary

This paper addresses the ethical and political issues relating to the relationship between the researcher and the fieldworker as well as the conduct of fieldwork. It argues that, since the relationship between the researcher and fieldworker is not governed by ethical principles nor by labour laws, the fieldworker finds him or herself dependent on the researcher or research organisation. And, since fieldworkers mostly depend on periodic employment, they are not in a position to bargain for the kinds of work in which they engage and the conditions under which such work is done. Thus, they are vulnerable to abusive behaviour from researchers and research organisations.

The paper further maintains that the manner in which fieldworkers and respondents are treated is related to the politics of fieldwork in development research; i.e. the role of race in the treatment of fieldworkers and respondents. The reluctance of many researchers to learn African languages, while it creates employment for fieldworkers, reveals a deeper attitude towards African languages specifically, and African culture generally. As has been argued, such an attitude leads to the flouting of the ethics of research with respect to both African fieldworkers and respondents. The focus on African respondents and the lack of attention to white people is the case that is most illuminating in this regard.

Bibliography


