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Wanted for Global Scholar: Research Assistant in the Global South

By: Sreeparna Chattopadhyay

The trend of doctoral scholars and researchers in Western universities hiring poorly paid Indians for fieldwork reinforces gatekeeping in knowledge production.

Just over a year ago, I saw a job advertisement for a research assistant in an email group. A PhD student in sociology at a prestigious university in the US was seeking to hire an Indian researcher in a tier one city to do everything except, it seemed, write his thesis.

The ad said that the researcher's tasks would include using government databases for secondary desk research and to verify primary data; making networks; drafting research instruments, collecting data by doing interviews, focus groups and observations in the local language; and "helping" with the analysis.

This was only one of several similar advertisements I have seen in recent months. Posted on Twitter – now X – Facebook and LinkedIn, these ads by students in Western universities are a reflection of the unethical practices that are rife in academia.

I was outraged. I wrote to the group copying the student to explain why this was a problem. The job description was that of a principal investigator, not a research assistant. Even if the work was compensated, the research assistant would not be counted as an author since PhD projects in the qualitative social sciences are expected to be primarily solo endeavours. I also pointed out that this was an unfair labour practice.

Research assistants are typically erased out of subsequent publications – their labour and intellectual inputs a mere footnote or entirely absent.

A senior academic on the mailing list reinforced my response, adding that by not undertaking the research themselves, the PhD student was in fact foregoing the chance of learning something valuable. The process of collecting data, developing networks and interacting with key informants teaches important lessons in how to do qualitative research.

Of course, it is no secret that social sciences research is [seldom a solo project](#). Despite this, research assistants are typically [erased](#) out of subsequent publications – their labour and intellectual inputs a mere footnote or entirely absent.

All of us who are trained in qualitative research methods know that epistemology (what counts as knowledge) is inextricably connected to ontology (the nature of reality). In empirical disciplines like sociology, anthropology, or political science, you cannot build theories – or at any rate good ones – unless you understand different world-views and ways of making meaning. If you outsource this work, you are losing the opportunity to develop important skills and are being disingenuous to your disciplinary training.

I got a sense of the strong feelings about these practices earlier this year, when I [tweeted](#) about a similar ad by a student at a US institution doing their PhD in economics. My post went viral and has been viewed 154,000 times.

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More than a dozen research assistants sent me messages describing their experience and more than 300 people reposted my message. Responses criticising the ethics of outsourcing fieldwork poured in from various disciplines – economics, anthropology, health sciences, geography, sociology, conservation. The list of offenders included the A listers of academia from the US, the UK, and Europe.

An iniquitous division

These outsourced jobs are a violation of academic integrity and ethics and highlight several problems.

To begin with, doctoral data collection in most qualitative disciplines is not unskilled work. There are considerable intellectual, emotional, and social investments that qualitative research demands from researchers.

If well done it leads to the development of key skills that I reckon not only make us good researchers, but also help us to be more mindful adults – understanding relational consent, building rapport, picking up on non-verbal cues, managing emotions, caring for our participants, being vulnerable and holding vulnerability of others, gathering tacit knowledge, responding to cultural differences appropriately, and other attributes.

Secondly, while there may be some justification in seeking the advice of key informants, by and large qualitative research involving fieldwork that is part of a PhD thesis should be driven and completed by graduate students.

Analysis and writing – which are the penultimate stages of publishing scholarly work– are not, in my opinion, more important than the collection of data.

Some social sciences are moving to the “lab” model common in the sciences. For example, in economics, this practice is established where principal investigators bring in funds but the rest of the work is done by a retinue of students, postdocs, and other early career researchers. But for many of the reasons I have discussed above, this model is not feasible or desirable in the empirical social sciences that rely on qualitative methods.

Despite this, even in these lab models, there are accountability processes that are meant to develop early career researchers – peer-to-peer learning, and guidance by more experienced researchers including the lab head. This is notably absent in outsourced work of the nature I have described not just by virtue of distance but also because graduate students who are pre-fieldwork are themselves not in a position to train other students.

Thirdly, analysis and writing – which are the penultimate stages of publishing scholarly work– are not, in my opinion, more important than the collection of data, although western Euro-centric epistemology, and Brahminical thought might persuade you otherwise. I think this belief system lies at the heart of why these kinds of job descriptions tend to be justified by researchers and institutions based in the West or steeped in Western epistemology. In the hierarchy of labour, writing and subsequent theorisation is the summit. As scholar Gopal Guru eloquently said, “...Indian social science represents a pernicious divide between [theoretical brahmins](#) and [empirical shudras](#).”

Extractive academics

At a more fundamental level, this kind of outsourced research is tied to the projects of imperialism and colonialism. There are numerous examples within anthropology, perhaps the most famous is that of James Frazer, the chair of the anthropology department at the University of Cambridge, and author of *The Golden Bough*, a must-read tome for all anthropology graduate students. Frazer wrote about “savage” customs based on questionnaires he sent out to missionaries and colonial officials during their expeditions abroad without first-hand exposure.

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Linda Tuhiwai Smith, an indigenous scholar from Aotearoa, New Zealand writing about research by settlers or outsiders says, “It told us things already known, suggested things that would not work, and made careers for people who already had jobs.”

These scholars based in high income countries subsequently become authoritative sources for what should happen in the Global South on a range of pressing issues ranging from women’s health to climate change.

They do not live and work here so have little skin in the game. While some of their intentions may appear noble, it is ultimately an example of what Eve Tuck, an indigenous scholar, and K. Wayne Young, describe as the alleviation of “[settler guilt](#)” without having to give up much privilege, or change in any meaningful way.

In their prescient article written nearly a decade before decolonisation became a buzzword in academia, they warned that the calls for decolonising academia to hollow out the influence of colonial knowledge in curriculums and foreground indigenous scholarship and methodologies were already, or were at the risk of becoming, an empty signifier, a mere metaphor.

Continuing a legacy

As some commentators have pointed out, many foreign-based researchers know that the practices they get away with in low- and middle-income countries would never fly in their own countries due to legal and labour protections there.

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In India and other low- and middle-income countries, precariously employed and contractual workers lack these safeguards. It is not uncommon to involve graduate students as research assistants in large projects in qualitative social sciences in the US. But I have not seen an instance of a graduate student being denied authorial credit or being unpaid.

The high rates of youth unemployment in India, coupled with the prospect of getting recommendation letters that might help admission to foreign universities in an unbelievably competitive education market, might explain why many Indian early-career researchers willingly take up these roles. They are unwittingly contributing to the perpetuation of a grossly unfair system of knowledge production. Their desperation makes this seem even more extractive.

Graduate students in the West are not inventing these extractive and neocolonial processes. They have been set in motion by their supervisors and teams of researchers that extract data from the Global South while building theories, policies and programmes in the Global North. How much countries like India have benefitted from such initiatives is an open question.

But what is clear is that these processes, especially from doctoral students, need to stop for their professional development and in the interest of wider equity especially as the calls for decolonisation in academia become even more strident.

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