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Bangladesh women find liberty in hard labor

The garment factory workers toil for paltry wages. But such jobs have also afforded Bangladeshi girls a measure of independence in a traditional Muslim society.

A year after Rana Plaza collapse, consumers demand more accountability
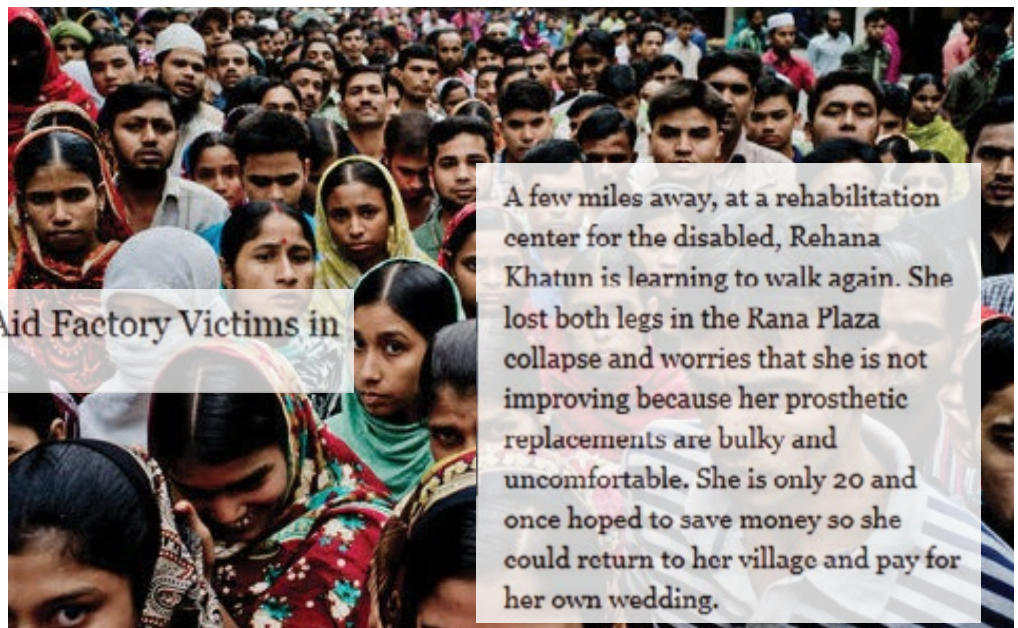
After Bangladesh Factory Collapse, Bleak Struggle for Survivors

Report on Deadly Factory Collapse in Bangladesh Finds Widespread Blame

U.S. Retailers Decline to Aid Factory Victims in Bangladesh

A few miles away, at a rehabilitation center for the disabled, Rehana Khatun is learning to walk again. She lost both legs in the Rana Plaza collapse and worries that she is not improving because her prosthetic replacements are bulky and uncomfortable. She is only 20 and once hoped to save money so she could return to her village and pay for her own wedding.

Media headlines and photos illustrate competing representations of women in Bangladesh following the collapse of the Rana Plaza garment factory. These serve as a prime example of how existing assumptions and biases can be easily reinforced and consequently detract from productive social change. *Image by Carolyn Abrams*

The Reality of the Researcher

Addressing Assumptions and Biases

BY CAROLYN ABRAMS AND ANA G. LUNA

ETHICS IN FIELDWORK has long been a popular topic of conversation. Researchers from diverse disciplines have focused on the position, privilege, and power of the practitioner. Through debate and discussion, academics and practitioners have identified research assumptions and biases as key influencers in research design, collection, and evaluation. However, despite frequent discussion, assumptions and biases continue to significantly skew research perspectives, therefore blocking productive social change. Moreover, within the area of international development and women's studies, an apparent disconnect prevails between practitioner's conceptual understanding and their willingness to actively address researcher realities.

In an effort to bridge the conceptual and the practical, this article examines the role of the researcher within the context of fieldwork. Through the exploration of objectivity and power distribution, we acknowledge contemporary tradeoffs, challenges, and strategies faced by researchers in designing, conducting, and interpreting data. In doing so, this article discusses the realities faced by researchers and provides best practices for addressing assumptions and biases.

Researching Women: An Objective Science?

In the past, social science and international development were purported to be objective and neutral, while simultaneously generalizing the female perspective and experience (Kabeer 1994; Bernard 1973; Callaway 1981; Smith 1988). Women were conceptualized in limited capacities (as housewives, caregivers, dependents, mothers) (Abrams, Luna, 2014, p. 35) and their experiences were regarded as anecdotal or feminine (p. 38). Observing "the production of knowledge as partial and gendered" (Mackinnon, 1982), Mackinnon and other second-wave feminist researchers argued 'objectivity' to be a flawed methodological stance, of which objectification is the social practice (Maynard, 1994). Many female-oriented researchers continue to support this critique by focusing on the "general inequalities and oppression experienced by women, as well as less biased and partial ways of researching and representing the social world" (Maynard, 1994).

During the last ten years, second-wave feminist writings have developed approaches and tools focused on the theoretical appropriateness of methods and technique. These contributions have influenced conceptual frameworks in the study of other oppressed and minority groups (such as gays, lesbians, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, and children) (Ali et al. 2000; Lewis and Lindsay, 2000; Plummer, 1995; Thomas 1999). Comparatively, very little research and writing has been dedicated to contributing actionable solutions, especially with regard to data analysis and research methods (Maynard 1994; Melissa and Bryman, 2004). This lack creates a noticeable tension, between what we, as researchers, preach and what we practice.

As this applies to objectivity, many social researchers would agree, in theoretical settings, that complete freedom from bias and personal value systems is ultimately unattainable (Melissa and Bryman, 2004). However, in the real world context of the

Female factory workers gather in the urban slums of Bangladesh to discuss workplace and household vulnerabilities with ActionAid researcher, Ana G. Luna, and partner organization, PSTC. *Photo by Ana G. Luna*

practicing researcher, methods, approaches, findings, and frameworks remain "riddled with unacknowledged personal beliefs, assumptions, and biographies" (Maynard, 1994, 138).

The following are indicators of an "objective" researcher:

- Ignoring how the personal cultural or religious beliefs of the researcher impact the framing, collecting, and interpreting of data (Holland, 1998; DeVault, 1999)
- Overlooking how personal perspective of the researcher changes and influences the research process (Skeggs, 1997; Mischler 1979)
- Downplaying research choices, challenges, and assumptions in creating design interventions, frameworks, procedures, and coding categories (Bryman, 1998; Bryman and Burgess 1994)

Practitioners who deny their inherent assumptions and biases, in an attempt to appear or achieve objectivity, gloss over the role of the researcher (Maynard, 1994, 141) and deny the influence the researcher has in shaping the reality experienced by female subjects (Maynard, 1994, 141). Doing so reduces researched women to static objects and generalized stereotypes and threatens the general purpose of female-focused research. Instead of viewing objectivity as an achieved state of mind where the analyst must bury existent biases or values, we urge fellow researchers to pursue objectivity as a "process in which all evidence is marshaled in the creation of knowledge, including

the hidden and unexplained cultural agendas, and assumptions of the knower/researcher are called into account" (Harding, 138). Thus, in defining objectivity as a developmental challenge, researchers must seek to discern between weak and strong objectivity. (See "Researcher Toolbox.")

Power Hierarchy: The Researcher Versus the Researched

Perceived as well as exercised power play a theoretically recognized—but practically ignored—dimension in the research process (Melissa and Bryman, 2004). Such imbalances in research expectations, duties, and privileges extend from the field to the office environment.

In practice, the researcher and the participant both engage in a mutual creation and collection of data (Harding, 1987). Despite this putative cooperation-oriented exchange, however, the balance of power is often skewed in favor of the researcher. The researcher expects women to reveal details of their experiences, while providing nothing personal of their own (Skeggs, 1997). The researcher also exercises the right to contextualize, interpret, define, and omit details of women's experiences on a consistent basis (Maynard, 1994). Charged with design, collection, and evaluation duties, the researcher constructs social realities and frameworks while seeking answers (Maynard 1994; Melissa and Bryman 2004). In this way, the questions researchers ask, the way researchers locate themselves within their own questions, and the purpose of their work influence the mechanics, outcomes, and quality of research (Maynard 1994).

As a product of human interaction and cooperation, power imbalances ultimately shift relationships and shape behaviors of both the researched and the researcher.

As a product of human interaction and cooperation, power imbalances ultimately shift relationships and shape behaviors of both the researched and the researcher. Passive researchers, either unaware or unwilling to address this power imbalance, often risk offending, exploiting, misinterpreting, and/or endangering study participants (Olesen, 2011; Olesen 1994).

That said, it is not always possible or realistic to know what has been influential to the participant and her/his range of feelings. In the field, many researchers find it difficult to make sure that what is being understood by the interviewer is being understood by the interviewee (Maynard, 1994). After all, most intervention types are linguistically heavy, yielding a multitude of rhetoric. Terms containing multiple meanings, definitions, and operational capacities require the researcher to identify and address discrepancies in the use and meaning of language during an interview and/or during analysis (Melissa and Bryman, 2004). Addressing the social reality that practitioners enter when executing research, we challenge researchers to recognize and reveal "what is usually hidden and unacknowledged as visible and part of the equation" (Maynard, 1994). (See "Researcher Toolbox.")

Drawings and maps detail the physical and social risks from the perspective of the researched. In this photo, women draw and explain the hardships associated with living next to an active railroad. *Photo by Ana G. Luna*

Aiming to increase the credibility, replicability, and transparency of research, we collected and created a list of best practices. Some techniques have existed for decades, while others are new. At the core is the guiding principle that "a researcher's background and position will affect what they choose to investigate, the angle of investigation, the methods judged most adequate for this purpose, the findings considered most appropriate, and the framing and communication of conclusions" (Malterud, 2001, p. 483-484). The following techniques aim to increase cohesion between theory and practice and also establish greater credibility and replicable research.

Create and Develop

A Reflexive Journal: This form of documentation provides a space for the researcher/investigator to record their methods, reasoning, decisions, and details about their project. Ongoing entries allow the researcher/investigator to reflect upon the research process and observe changes in their own values and perspectives. Given the influential nature of these changes, such a journal can provide greater insight into the research process.

A Researcher Autobiography: A researcher autobiography allows researchers to reflect and document how gender, class, race, religion, previous experience, and personal assumptions influence research design and analysis. Separate from the reflexive journal (which is completed throughout the research process), a researcher autobiography is completed in advance. This tool has the potential to identify how social and technical choices impact research design, methods, interpretation, and community relationships.

Reports that Document Frameworks, Definitions, and Procedures: In producing research reports and publications, the author can provide further transparency by divulging (however briefly) initial assumptions, core beliefs, and values that may have influenced research design, collection, and analysis. This practice can serve as a disclaimer to the reader and can encourage greater understanding of the research process.

Incorporate

Multiple Investigators: By involving numerous investigators, the researcher creates an environment in which a multiplicity of knowledge, perspectives, and understandings can be incorporated into the research process (whether complementary or divergent). In doing so, there is an opportunity to cultivate a reflexive dialogue and therefore identify and challenge assumptions and bias. The goal here is not to reach an "objective" truth but rather to gather the most information to help present and interpret research findings.

Video and Audio Recordings or Photos: Utilizing such documentation provides a practical way to capture important details of the research process. This material includes—but is not limited to—conversations, tone, emotion, body language, and environmental factors. Each of these tools can provide context, enable the researcher to refer back for further observation and analysis, and prevent oversights and mis-documentation. Most notably, these tools give others the opportunity to make observations and draw their own conclusions, which further challenges researcher assumptions and bias.

Clarification: This process questions the use and meanings of terms during the data collection process. By defining relevant terms and incorporating clarifying questions throughout the research process, and particularly when interviewing, the researcher can provide a better understanding for how they intend language to be used and interpreted. This practice can help prevent misunderstandings and promote greater consistency in the data collection process.

Recognize and Record

Moments of Difficulty and Challenge: To increase transparency and clarity in the research process, practitioners should embrace difficulties and challenges. Discussing and describing decision-making and rationality creates cohesion between

Focus groups and map making activities were structured by the researcher and facilitated by local community women. In this way, female participants played an active role in shaping discussions surrounding community challenges and triumphs.
Photo by Ana G. Luna

research questions, methods, and outcomes, and thereby increases the quality and accessibility of research.

Body Language: Non-verbal exchanges, laughter, or distress are non-explicit cues that can be helpful indicators when interviewing and collecting data. By documenting various forms of expression, the researcher can record key reactions that might otherwise be dismissed or left unnoticed. As a result, the researcher provides a clearer picture of the research subject and avoids the misrepresentation of findings.

Approach

Interviews as Storytelling: In an effort to address uneven balances in power, some practitioners have chosen to approach interviews through storytelling. Through this method, practitioners increase the respondent's ability to shape and contextualize their experiences. In addition, feelings, behaviors, and values are more accessible to the researcher and available for clarification and analysis.

Methods and Analysis: Variations of participatory structures and quasi-validation processes have been in existence for decades. Aimed at increasing cooperation between the researcher and the researched, quasi-validation processes or participatory structures increase the agency of respondents. Possessing increased ownership through use of this method, respondents are far more likely to provide genuine responses and feedback. This method also increases the researcher's ability to clarify terms and address challenges/threats to study validity.

Ana Luna and Carolyn Abrams at Marquette University, where they presented their research at the Sexuality, Human Rights, and Public Policy Conference

Carolyn Abrams (shown above right) *graduated from the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs with a Master of Urban and Regional Planning. Her research primarily focused on international development, gender equity, and access to resources. She is passionate about social justice and hopes to provide a voice for underrepresented communities in the public policy making process. Her long-term goal is to become a policy analyst and create legislation that addresses our most pressing social needs.*

Ana G. Luna (shown above left) *holds a Master's degree in Urban Planning from UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs. With extensive academic training in research design, development, and analysis, Ms. Luna has collaborated with sugarcane farming communities in Uganda, African-American sex workers in the USA, Mexican garment factory workers in USA, and female heads-of-household*

in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. She continues to work in international development as a research and cross-cultural communications consultant.

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