

RESEARCH AS EXPERIENCED

PESQUISA COMO EXPERIÊNCIA

INVESTIGACION COMO EXPERIENCIA

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RESUMO

Esta é uma tentativa de registrar como experimentei a 'pesquisa' enquanto conduzia um trabalho de campo etnográfico em uma vila de pescadores como parte de um projeto para entender experiências de 'incerteza'. Vou primeiro descrever o que semeou/disparou esta escrita - o incômodo que experienciei durante meus primeiros dias na aldeia. A seguir, detalharei minha disposição com relação ao projeto específico em questão aqui e como cheguei à aldeia. Na segunda metade do artigo, por meio de reflexões, recordações e trechos de minhas notas de campo, tentarei ilustrar como as noções de consentimento, relacionamento, dados, etc. moldaram e restringiram minha experiência durante (e no) estudo de campo e que efeitos tinham isso tinha em meu ser. Não pretendo argumentar a favor ou contra certas práticas ou chegar a alguma conclusão, mas buscar ressonâncias e conversas com aqueles que possam ter tido experiências semelhantes.

Palavras-chave: consentimento. pesquisar. experiência. etnografia. reflexão.

ABSTRACT

This is an attempt at putting down how I experienced 'research', while conducting an ethnographic field work at a fishing village as part of a project to understand experiences of 'uncertainty'. I will first describe for the reader what seeded/triggered this write up—the unease I experienced during my initial days at the village. This shall be followed by detailing my disposition with respect to the particular project in question here and how I arrived at the village. In the second half of the paper, through reflection, recollection and excerpts from my field notes, I will try to illustrate how notions of consent, rapport, data etc shaped and constrained my experience during (and of) the field study and what effect it had on my being. I do not intend to argue for or against certain practices or arrive at some conclusion, but wish to seek resonances and conversations with those who may have had similar experiences.

Keywords: consent. research. experience. ethnography. reflection

RESUMEN

Este es un intento de exponer cómo experimenté la "investigación", mientras realizaba un trabajo de campo etnográfico en un pueblo de pescadores como parte de un proyecto para

comprender las experiencias de "incertidumbre". Primero describiré para el lector lo que sembró/desencadenó este artículo: la inquietud que experimenté durante mis primeros días en la aldea. Esto será seguido por detallar mi disposición con respecto al proyecto en cuestión y cómo llegué al pueblo. En la segunda mitad del artículo, a través de la reflexión, el recuerdo y extractos de mis notas de campo, intentaré ilustrar cómo las nociones de consentimiento, relación, datos, etc. moldearon y restringieron mi experiencia durante y del estudio de campo y qué efecto tuvo en mi ser. No pretendo argumentar a favor o en contra de ciertas prácticas ni llegar a alguna conclusión, sino buscar sintonía con quienes hayan tenido experiencias similares.

Palabras clave: consentir. investigación. experiencia. etnografía. reflexión.

The Trigger

Or Where I am writing from!

I stayed in a 'traditional artisanal fishing village', on the southeastern coast of India, for two months to do 'research', aimed at producing a thesis in 'Mathematics Education', which focuses on experiences of uncertainty. The intention was to learn from the people of the village how uncertainty is understood, experienced and responded to in the context of an occupational practice (fishing here), through ethnographic observation and (possibly) spontaneous conversations. I struggled to initiate conversations with the people of the village during the first few weeks. And when I finally started having conversations, I could not make myself write the names of those whom I met daily, had tea together at a tea shop, or had random conversations with, in my notes. Whenever I tried to write names, I felt uncomfortable and often ended up writing their initials. To write their names, I had to consciously try. The feeling while trying to write 'real' names was that of committing some grave sin¹. I firmly believed that I would have had no difficulty in initiating conversations if I was living in the village as a renter with a regular job in some nearby place or so, instead of as a researcher. The emotional difficulties and dissonances arising from these experiences dominated most of the conversations I used to have with friends and acquaintances during those days.

One of the reasons I struggled to initiate conversations was due to privacy concerns. Since I wanted to talk to people about their experiences of uncertainty, it, at some level, meant talking about their lives. I was uncomfortable talking to people about their lives— what business did I have in the life of another? I would like to point out here that my concerns were not about effectively anonymising 'participants' of my study, but mostly because I struggled at identifying what may be seen as prying into lives and what will not be. However, later I found out that these concerns about privacy were perhaps misplaced. It would not be an exaggeration to say that most of the villagers who talked to me came to know more personal information about me than most of my academic colleagues. It was not seen as intrusive by the villagers to ask questions about my whereabouts, where I am from, who all are in my family, my plans, how much I earn and so on. They expressed concerns about me being single at 30 and advised me to secure a 'real' job soon and settle down with a family. This was not a novel experience for me. People from my native/locality would also not shy away from similar questions. It would thus appear that what constitutes intrusion and privacy varies for people I know from my 'field', life and academia².

These experiences form the context of this write up. I am speaking from (and for) the periods when I experienced what may be termed as emotional difficulties while engaging with 'research'. Thus, this writing is expected to be cathartic and provocative. It is cathartic in the sense of expressing the distress which was experienced. The reader may find it is provocative in the sense that it shares individual convictions, views, and perspectives (about research) in bare-bones form. I also intentionally use

¹ I do not endorse either of the positions. While an outsider like me may find it warm and welcoming, it need not be for a resident. As one of my friends pointed out, these 'concerns' are one of the ways patriarchy surveils and disciplines individuals, especially women.

² ASHA or Accredited Social Health Activists are female community health activists trained to work as an interface between the community and the public health system under the National rural health Mission of the Government of India.

provocative assertions and questions as a means to (hopefully) effectively communicate the underlying emotions and the thought processes, as provocative is how I felt them. So, I feel that meanings and particulars of research are immaterial here as the intention is not to examine what are desirable forms of research and researching but communicate particular experiences. However, I shall add that whenever I say research I mean investigations (almost exclusively) aimed at producing academic scholarship, financially supported by institutions and stand to add to the academic credentials of the researcher.

This write up is also an attempt at talking about Mathematics Education Research as (I), a ‘novice researcher’, working in India, with limited formal training in sociological or anthropological research, experienced it. This is neither a research report nor a theoretical contribution. At best, this is reflections of a ‘researcher’ and, at worst, ramblings of someone who is inexperienced and lacks ‘skills’ to do research. If this were a research report, I might have analysed how extraneous ideas about desirable and ethical practices contribute to the production and reproduction of the researcher/researched binary. However, I would like to narrate my experience in words which are closer to me, than through theoretical categories. My intention here is not to suggest that theory and experience are mutually exclusive. I thank the reviewer (Sofía Abreu) for pointing me towards the works of Sara Ahmed and particularly to the notion of sweaty concepts which I and the intention of this write up seem to resonate with. Sweaty concepts are generated *when trying to describe something that is difficult, that resists being fully comprehended in the present* (Ahmed, 2016, p 12). Ahmed uses the notion of sweaty concepts to point at the often strict boundary between descriptive and conceptual work and show how descriptive work is conceptual work. By looking at concepts as worldly, *a reorientation to a world, a way of turning things around ...* (ibid. p 13) Ahmed describes a sweaty concept as “*one that comes out of a description of a body that is not at home in the world*” (ibid. p 13). Sweaty concepts emanate from a body which is in misalignment with the world (conceptual or otherwise) it inhabits. It is a product of bodily experiences and captures the experiences of discomfort within the given world. It may be said that this write up is a sweaty concept emerging from my feeling of ‘not being at home’ in my ‘field’ in relation to the ideas of research I had. However, I shall stick to my original conviction to stay clear of theoretical categories and claiming ‘theoriness’ unto this writing. I believe that experiences and reflections upon them should be able to stand on their own without necessarily having to talk to and (or) as theory. Here I look at theory as conceptualisation which happens within academia. For me, experience is a thing to talk about, and for others to possibly resonate, compare, contrast, and so on. Whereas theory for me (and theoretical categories) are things we talk with and often use as a lens, like ‘sweaty concepts’ became a way to frame this write up. Theories also often come with authorities on theories. My intention in this write up is to invite possible resonances (with my experiences), share the convictions I developed through those experiences (as possibly provocations) and have conversations. It is in these senses that I would prefer to not claim ‘theoriness’ for this write up.

I will first describe how I arrived at a fishing village to do part of the work towards my PhD thesis in Mathematics Education. Then through excerpts from my field notes, I will try to sketch aspects of how I experienced research. Towards the end, I will discuss my learnings and questions which emerged. While I claim to be speaking from and for my experience, I should qualify that my experience, in addition to being that of a ‘novice researcher’, is also of someone highly privileged in my society, an anglophone³ cis-hetero appearing male belonging to an upper caste, and need not have any generalisable element.

The Backdrop

Probably owing to positioning, (lack of) reading, or sheer laziness, I always had discomfort in ‘researching others’— those who are very removed from me, socially, emotionally and more importantly, in terms of socio-material capital. My thesis project was first conceived as one about understanding how uncertainty is experienced by different social actors and how the mathematisation of

³ Our proposal in short was to examine how the mathematical rationalisation of uncertainty and social relations of power co-produce each other and understand the role of education in reproducing and perpetuating these relations. We chose health and finance as primary contexts for investigation.

uncertainty formats these experiences through probability theory and statistics. The social actors here were an arbitrary category— what I perceived comfortable then was to talk to people from my extended family and my locale (I stay 1500 KM away from my place these days). Since we were going through the second wave of the Pandemic then, I propositioned the Pandemic as the context for these conversations. This was also the time when I was introduced to the works of Kim TallBear, namely ‘*Standing with and speaking as faith: A feminist-indigenous approach to inquiry*’. Some of the ideas in the paper appear to be talking to the concerns I had about doing ‘research’. Following this I proposed studying across and from the top instead of from the bottom (TallBear, 2014), that is, to study how institutions and the mainstream/centre function instead of describing those in their peripheries. Thus the question of ‘giving back’, which used to trouble me, and which, as per TallBear, reinforces the binary of the researcher and the researched, gave way to a promise to focus on learning how to ‘stand with’ the community (in some sense I could claim membership to this proposed community through nativity and kinship). I promised to study up, to turn the gaze, while standing with ‘my acquaintances from long’, who had little say on how and what the response to the Pandemic should have been and were compelled to respond based on the information made available to them by the state and through the media. These are the people who were never asked what they wanted to know (about the pandemic), or how they wanted to respond. I intended to collectivise their perspectives and turn the gaze onto the top— to contrast this with the assumptions that undergirded the works of modellers and policymakers.

However, ‘acquaintances from long’ constituted an undefined ‘sample’. In subsequent deliberations with my mentors, we decided to work with/talk to ‘ASHA workers⁴ and Domestic workers/helps’. We chanced upon this ‘group of people’ when in one of our discussions, the interactions between the domestic help and a relative of one of us came up. We found aspects of those interactions to be resonating with our questions around risk, vulnerability, uncertainty, power and social, especially in the context of the Pandemic. The fact that we were in the middle of a health emergency and ASHA workers were among the [least paid](#) but put into tricky situations meant that they also appeared as an ideal group to talk to⁵.

We were then to compare and contrast the participants’ experiences with policy decisions and mathematics which informs these decisions to understand how mathematics configures and reconfigures lives and social relations. My difficulties around ‘studying’ those who are more vulnerable or marginalised than I (the researcher)— in whose lives and communities I had no stake, re-emerged at this point. I tried to convince myself by broadening what it means to ‘stay with’ and by promising to engage in democratic knowledge production, which benefits not only those who inquire but also those who are inquired (TallBear, 2014). TallBear (2014) had also suggested that it would be “helpful to think creatively about the research process as a relationship-building process, as a professional networking process with colleagues (not “subjects”), as an opportunity for conversation and sharing of knowledge, not simply data gathering”. While these appeared to answer some of the questions, most doubts lingered (as I would later learn the hard way, it is one thing to read and feel empowered by a compelling argument and another to live/experience it).

Moreover, we had arrived at ‘our community’ to be researched through an anecdote as mentioned above. Of the two actors in the story, the househelp and the employer, the househelp appeared as an obvious choice of research for us. Why did not we debate the possibility of researching the employers? Given that our question was about uncertainty and mathematics, would studying the employer who may be assumed to share socio-economic locations with me have resulted in less and different insights? Why did we choose to centre our inquiry on the employed? Were we inadvertently falling prey to ‘selling stories of sacrifices’ as Gopal Guru remarked in comments to Kunnath (2013)? Thus in short the interim comfort I derived from the works of TallBear in terms of how I may approach research broke down once

⁴ Sunandan builds his case by demonstrating how the ‘colonial-brahminical concept of knowledge’ invalidated practices, especially in the context of *Asaris* (carpenter caste).

⁵ As pointed out by a reviewer I acknowledge that pseudonyms may be used to both protect the identity of ‘participants’ and to maintain their dignity. However, my concern here is not about how participants may be represented in a dignified manner, but exclusively about the difficulties I experienced in writing names in my (personal) notes.

I shifted the intended field of research. The fact that I was going to work with a group with whom I had no similarity, with whom I had no shared past or concerns should have alerted me to the fragility of comfort I had built through the notions of standing with and studying from bottom which originally appeared applicable if I were to ‘study with’ acquaintances of long (a community to which I could claim membership).

While these may appear as valid questions, they are also something which has been debated and addressed by serious scholars working in engaged research (Kunnath, 2013). TallBear was also addressing similar questions. Thus one may say that it was possible to deal with them. Unfortunately it wasn't how I experienced it.

The other aligned concern was about the openness of our research question itself. Uncertainty cuts across all aspects of life, so talking about uncertainty essentially meant talking to people about their lives. As indicated earlier, I experienced/imagined talking to people about their lives as akin to prying into their lives. This was deeply discomfoting. The openness of uncertainty also led to almost everything becoming data, and I started seeing myself as a ‘data vulture’. Below I produce an excerpt from my research notes/memos from a few days after I had submitted my research proposal. Just after I had arrived at the project, I travelled to my native place to ‘collect data’. The note is based on an incident which occurred during this journey to native. I had written it as a ‘reflective recollection’ a couple of days after the journey. It is copied verbatim, including the title. I intend these excerpts I quote from my notes to speak for themselves. I will not be analysing or elaborating on them.

What does research do to you as a person?

What happens to you the moment the intention of collecting data for your thesis comes to dominate your waking life?

I randomly came across a person at Kozhikode railway station, an elderly man, dishevelled, who was travelling from his worksite in Mangalapuram to home by hopping from one train to another. He had purchased a ticket from the counter and was enquiring about the platform where his train was expected to arrive. I was also due to catch the same train. We were on the right platform, were going in the same direction, and there was some time for the train to come, so we got talking. Somewhere, the conversation drifted onto his reason to go home. Maybe he wanted to tell his story. Maybe he wanted to be heard. Maybe because he was drunk—I could smell alcohol every time he said something. ‘My Son committed a foolish act’— he said. His son, father of two young boys, aged 33, who used to be quiet, who used to accompany his father to work, committed suicide. The elderly man wanted to see his son one last time. I assured him that he should be home by 4:00 AM the next day. It was already past 6:00 PM, and it was unlikely that the funeral would happen during the night. Maybe I should have asked him some questions or talked to him for a little longer. That did not happen because our train arrived and we went to different compartments. I saw him getting into a reserved compartment; his ticket was for an unreserved compartment only. Maybe I should have followed him and told him to board the right compartment or spared some money which would be enough to pay the penalty if the ticket examiner catches and decides to penalise him. But he did have money; I saw a few notes when he showed me his ticket. Maybe he did manage and did not have to go through further harassment in addition to the emotional trauma he was going through.

However, amidst all this, I found myself drifting towards my ‘research question’; I wondered how this [conversation] would fit into my scheme of things/thoughts.

There was a phone call he wanted me to make for him. It did not go through then. Maybe I should call that number again after a couple of days and get the rest of the story. And while at it, I should also get a consent form signed!

The reader may find it ironic and even hypocritical that I used a certain story to illustrate why I think it should not be written. The irony has not missed me either. This is perhaps the first time I concretely noticed that the agenda of research does something fundamental to my (our) person(s) and the relations I (we) build— a thought which has continued to stay with me. I do not think I could have conveyed it better otherwise.

These tensions made the open nature of the research and the initial choice of ‘participants’ untenable. While I was grappling with this question, one of my mentors suggested that it would be helpful to scope the question of uncertainty in the context of a practice, preferably one which is publicly accessible. This could turn questions of uncertainties in lives into questions of uncertainties about the practice. Due to questions of immediate access and potential for academic collaboration, I found artisanal fishing in general and fishing auction in particular as sites of uncertainty which I may study.

Thus I arrived at the fishing village with the intention to stay for two months.

The experiences, The learnings

On informed consent and Signatures

Even during the earlier stages of the project we had deliberated on what it meant to ask people who, due to past experiences and historical reasons (Raman, 2012) look at signatures and those who demand signatures with suspicion but are willing to talk to strangers (as I have experienced) out of goodwill and kindness, to sign consent forms? We were also aware of this through experience, hearsay and literature. So we had decided not to take any signed consent form from anybody we talked to. Instead, I opted to explain the nature of our study and take permission if I recorded conversations. In fact, Balu ‘Annan’ (a vernacular term to address elder brother— older person), while explaining some aspects of fishing, asked me to record the conversation instead of trying to make notes from memory. It is in this backdrop I would like to share my reflections (relation) around (with) the process of listening and consent. I do not intend to claim that they apply to research in other contexts. In fact it may be said that it is the particulars of my questions and place which created the kind of experience(s) I had. Another person may experience the question of ‘consent’ differently.

In my experience people share their stories or experiences just for the sake of it. They do so because they know you, or know someone who knows you, or someone has put in a good word for you, or they think that you ‘look like’ someone they can talk to and so on. Of course, this also means that the act and the actors are not neutral entities engaged in an ahistorical moment; it happens within social networks and relational structures historically rooted and played out in every moment. That is, the stories are told through(to) multiple persons, and are marked by social relations. I prefer to believe that the stories I have happened to listen to either as a ‘researcher’ or before setting out to become one, are/were shared in good faith, assumed to be between some kind of equals, and told to someone willing to listen. Framed thus, this relationship is not something which can clearly be laid out on a sheet of paper without doing injustice to the relation itself. It is a connection arrived at through a highly enmeshed network of trust and good faith.

Reducing this to a question of written consent would collapse this network into a quasi-legal document (consent form) where the logic of legality takes precedence over that of human relations. Further as mentioned above signature is a dubious entity. Many would have experienced or would have heard of (as I infer from my local) being stripped of properties and livelihoods because of signatures. Hence anyone who asks for a signature is also dubious. Irrespective of the existing relations, seeking a signature will recast the seeker in a different light.

These thoughts made way for the following questions in my mind. What good are ethics and morals if you cannot trust yourself and the other; that neither party intend to, nor will, harm the other; that neither party intend to, nor will, lie to each other; that neither party intend to, nor will, exploit the other; especially when the relationship in question in itself come about because of trust among a network of actors? Transacting a story in lieu of the promise that it will not be used to bring harm is not what someone would expect when they agree to share their story. Why would I trust it with someone if there is something harmful about the story? If it indeed is transactional, do we buy the rights to the story!

Rapport — who methodically tries to build relations?

My learnings from the village were mostly recorded as notes. As I mentioned earlier, I struggled to initiate conversations during my early days at the village. This manifested in different forms in my notes, ranging from admonishing myself and my lack of skills to wonderment about how others in the past, especially those from the west, who are linguistically, culturally and racially removed from the ‘researched’ have gone about their studies and built ‘rapport’. Maybe the exoticness of their appearance gave them an advantage, and the ‘everydayness’ about my being went against me. Though once I started having conversations the latter made it possible for me to have conversations as I imagined— like how I would have conversations with people from my locale on matters of mutual interests— ranging from work to life to local politics to exchanging ‘notes’ on cultural and religious practices, languages, script and so on. So now, when I go through my notes, I find remarks like *‘if I would have been treated differently if I had played the role of anglophone elite properly?’* and *‘if the rugged and shabby look was harming my chances?’* obnoxious. Personally, the second month of my stay was very refreshing and rewarding. It is thus no surprise that reflections about ‘research’ became thinner in my notes as my stay at the village progressed. Following is an excerpt from my notes from my earlier days at the village.

Around 10:30, there is not much activity on the beach. I could spot a huge group of women resting, talking, and sleeping with fish baskets near them. I could have talked to them, introduced myself, told them why I was there and started some conversation. Instead, I just walked past them, worrying about what to tell them, about being an intruder, about the lack of language skills and so on. I am unsure if it is a lack of skills as a researcher or a human person hampering me from initiating meaningful conversations with people. I appear to be scared and extremely worried about consequences, appearing awkward, offending people etc— is it a sense of failure? How do other researchers do this? Is it the lack of a concrete question which is affecting me? Something which I can go and ask people or tell them? Anyway, I walked past them.... There was also a tourist family on the beach....

During my stay in the village, I told multiple people how a researcher’s identity was more limiting than enabling me. I have repeatedly remarked that had I been there as a renter or even as a tourist, I would not have had this degree of difficulty in starting conversations with people. My notes in those days were very similar and were increasingly self-loathing. A few days later (during the days of struggle), I wrote:

Again I woke up late and somehow felt reluctant to go to the beach as I thought the auction was at its last stages. I as a person is playing a great role here, in not being able to put myself in better positions to collect data. These at some level may be considered as ethical concerns and at some they are mostly to do with the psychological makes of the person, of particularly not wanting to put oneself in positions of vulnerability— for instance not wanting to put myself in a position of speaking wrongly in a language, to be not made fun of, to be not felt awkward, to not make people feel awkward, to not have people have ‘wrong’ impressions about me, fear of failing, considering self as important and so on and so forth.... How has countless people in past and present done research in cultures, spaces and languages absolutely alien to them? What are the skills which people usually have which I lack?

Experiences were not the only source of discomfort those days. One day I happened to read Arati Sridhar’s (Sridhar, 2019) work on the field workers employed by the fisheries department over the years to collect data on catch and allied details. While the paper was very insightful, the experience of one particular field worker unsettled me. They had reported that it was not unusual for the field worker’s presence to be seen as a bad omen and be blamed for a poor catch. That particular week the average catch in the village appeared less. So I developed this outlandish concern that if people would think that my presence was one of the reasons for the decline in catch over that week.

Eventually, I grew out of those difficulties. What worked in my favour, as I mentioned earlier, was the outgoing attitudes of the villagers. Once they learned that I was there as part of PhD work, they were happy to tell me whatever I wanted to learn. The relationships developed out of chance meetings, casual enquiries about my whereabouts, because we used to come across each other at a tea shop every evening, and so on.

Research is not the only profession where relationship building is critical. Almost no practice happens in isolation. But, I feel that theorisations about relation-building processes and positing of the relation the researchers have with their ‘participants/subjects’ as something different, comes from the desire to mark ‘research’ and ‘academia’ differently from other professions— as something rooted in a different

system of values and requiring different forms of thinking and creativity. It is funny that (intent of) research makes even something primal and humane like playing (cricket) a concerted attempt at building ‘rapport’. From my notes: “*I went to play in the evening at the behest of young people I met yesterday. They had said that playing could be an easier way to get familiar with people in the village.*”

What did I learn? Or What do I think?

My experiences may be interpreted to be situated within the dilemma of insider/outsider binary, questions around universality of ethics, or lack of skills or on the open nature of the questions I was investigating. One may also use them to problematise the questions of ethics and the universality of ethical standards demanded by institutional bureaucracies and scholarly cultures. Recent scholarships have addressed these questions by urging to contextualise the questions of ethics in the local of the research as opposed to appealing to universal standards which invariably are set by the global north (Zhang, 2017; Millora et al., 2020; Msoroka & Amundsen, 2018). Here I am more interested in what my experiences told me, about research and what it means to do ‘knowledge production’. I experienced that it was my learned ideas about desirable conducts for a researcher vis a vis consent forms, anonymisation, privacy, intrusion, data etc., which created difficulties for me. As I learned, notions of privacy, intrusions etc., are also deeply cultural, and what is seen as the proper conduct somewhere will not be so elsewhere and vice versa. Thus modelling oneself based on learned/read or some abstract imported ideals can potentially hamper the ability to just ‘be’ (and talk to people as you would) and lead to emotional and practical difficulties. I still feel reasonably disgusted that I could not write the names of people I have had conversations with, in my notes. I feel terrible that I looked at almost everything which came my way as data. Through these acts, I feel that I was objectifying people, processes and their experiences. By feeling compelled to write initials as opposed to names, I was essentially stripping people of their personhood. Would I have done the same thing if an ‘academic’ had contributed to my learning? I would have certainly acknowledged such a person as it has become customary to the trade. What makes Balu anna, Ezhimala Anna, Krishnan Anna, Satya akka or Satheesh, just initials or possibly pseudonyms who are not on par with scholars or reflective practitioners but while in effect, what I gain from them is the same thing— knowledge that they have acquired through practice and experience.

“If the ability of a person to turn around his circumstances in favour of the survival and betterment of himself and his fellow men can be called ‘knowledge’ and his smartness to survive adverse conditions can be called ‘skill’, the fishing community can definitely claim the foremost position among all the communities on earth that survive on the basis of a combination of knowledge and skill.” — Robert Panipilla (Panipilla, 2015, xiv).

Research as Knowledge Exchange? Musings I conclude with no resolution

This is an attempt to make sense of my dissonances and arrive at some form of resolution. As I have mentioned multiple times in this write up, I don’t mean to claim that this is how it ought to be for others.

Why could not I see research as knowledge exchange, for instance? This is an impossible dream in a graded hierarchical society where knowledge is also graded. The differential positioning of knowledge vis a vis a gradient of inferior to superior makes some people knowledgeable and others not (Sunandan, 2023)⁶. This translates into only some people being capable of teaching and or sharing knowledge, whereas most others can only be studied, not learned from. Thus one becomes a researcher, and the other researched. The conceptions about the researcher, which emphasise on extraneous components (like forms, conduct, rapport etc) contributes to production and reproduction of this binary.

Relationships are transactive, mutualistic or exploitative. I hold that the kind of knowledge I (we) (researcher) possess is of little to no use to most people. It is neither functional nor pragmatic in the immediate. This deems research to be more of an exploitative relation, even though we would like it to

⁶ I wasn’t born or brought up in an anglophone family. I acquired the relevant attributes mostly through and during my academic training.

be mutualistic. This for me would probably explain the emphasis we put on scrutinising our actions, as an attempt to not appear exploitative.

When I look back, It is the mutualistic intent of the people in the village which made the stay pleasant for me during the later days. The conflicts I experienced in part were the tension between the inherently exploitative nature of research in an unequal society and my desire to appear/(convince myself about being) mutualistic. In my experience, this tension is not resolvable and perhaps a burden we (I) ought to carry, having chosen to enter the profession of academia.

I experienced research through the binary of the researcher and the researched. It acted on my being, often moulding the ways in which I otherwise would behave, talk and be. The extraneous components which qualify learning to make it research seemed to be at the center of the tensions I experienced. When I eventually managed to talk to people and finally came to see their practice as something to learn from and report and not something from which data is to be gathered, I was at ease. Nevertheless, the questions remain. And probably they will remain thus as long as ‘research’ is in a society where knowledge is graded. I cannot see how research-researched relationships can ever be equal. No theorisations seem to help it. I shall end this write-up by narrating an episode from one of the last days of my stay at the village.

I was sitting at the auction shed waiting for the auction to begin. Some women were enquiring about my work and asking why I stand and observe and don’t speak much and if I shouldn’t be asking more questions if my purpose is to learn. To this one of the akka’s whom I had a conversation with the day before told them that this is what researchers do— stare, they stare and observe and maybe make notes. Now that I think of it, only two people of note were complete outsiders to the auction process at the auction site often, a policeman on some patrolling duty and I. Everyone else was either sellers or buyers, irrespective of whether they sold or bought on a given day. How was my work different from that of the policeman at the moment? While it is not difficult to argue that they are different in spirit and practice, I would rather not, and leave it at this possibly troubling dissonance which emerges from a superficial observation.

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