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Research Note:

From Mini Development-Machine to Being Human: Research as Social Exchange

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While conducting field-based social science research, the relationships I have had with those around me has always teetered awkwardly between a contrived extraction of information and a free-flowing exchange. My arrival to an area for the sake of learning something new, although a seemingly benign intention, unavoidably shifts power-differentials (Madge, Raghuram, Skelton, Willis, & Williams, 1997; Sprague, 2005). This essay explores not only how I think about power differentials influencing my own research but also how I have physically and emotionally navigated the power differentials I introduce to an area while in the field.

I conduct research in a region of the world where my racial, financial, and educational privileges contrast sharply with the people around me. Initially, I hesitated asking for too much time or information from people, worrying that I would be indebted too greatly to too many people. Over the years, I have slowly allowed myself to be open to deeper relationships, and I have learned to give more freely not just my material wealth, but also my ideas and friendship. I have learned to stop seeing my privileges as scarce goods to be protected and doled out in measure. Instead I have learned that my power and privilege

are the least destructive when clearly visible and important pieces of the social exchange called research.

As a scholar activist, my research aims to find ways to promote greater social justice and specifically gender equality in the context of conservation projects in Madagascar. Although I would like to think otherwise, like much research, the likelihood of my work influencing policy or changing the way in which conservation and development organizations operate is fairly slim. Instead, my presence in my research sites and my daily interactions with those around me when working and living in Madagascar are possibly the largest direct impact I will have on people. When I first started working in the field, understanding this reality was like dragging around a heavy suitcase of guilt, from which I pulled items with unease to help lighten my load. Despite many attempts to try to “help” people by giving money or items, I learned over the years that my suitcase of guilt never seemed to get lighter. I realize now that the way that I addressed my privilege as I faced it every day was analogous to a mini development-machine. I figured that giving money was the most useful piece of my privilege I could provide to others, along with occasional English lessons. I was willing to give money to many people, some of whom were friends, others were acquaintances, and still others were friends of friends. I gave money with a certain set of conditions, tending to give to people with the most convincing needs, or for things that matched most closely with my values: paying for education or training, buying materials such as a new camera for a photographer, or a rickshaw for a rickshaw puller that would enable autonomous money-making. I sometimes gave out loans and had payment plans written out for each loan-taker. I felt like a one-woman development organization, trying to enhance my “positive impact” on the people who surrounded me. I was pragmatic. I desperately wanted to be efficient and effective with my investments. Similar to a development organization, the people to whom I most frequently gave money had honed in on my gift or loan conditions, learned what type of assistance I would most likely fund. They learned the right thing to say and the best way in which to request money from me.

In the end, most of my investments “failed” in terms of achieving the goals that I set out to achieve. And that was just the problem—my investments were wrapped up in my own goals and sense of what was “rational,” “sustainable,” or truly “empowering.” These were all concepts that I could easily deconstruct in the confines of academia, but notions that stubbornly resisted my relationship to my own privilege and the avenues through which I was willing to share that privilege. It was one thing to critique the failures and short-sightedness of a conveniently distant multinational finance institution or the standard big-boy development players, but turning the critical lens inwards to analyze the way in which I was using my privilege to “do good” in the world or benefit others proved much more difficult. My “failed” investments included the money I provided for two children’s board and education, which was instead used to hospitalize their grandmother during an unexpected illness. The digital camera I gave to a photographer broke and could not be repaired without an expensive (and unattainable) piece from overseas. The rickshaw driver re-sold the rickshaw several months after I bought it to pay off debt he had accrued over the previous few years—people had come collecting once they saw he had enough money to buy a rickshaw. These scenarios and dozens more left me feeling frustrated. I

was no better than the development organizations that were so heavily critiqued in the university courses I had taken and taught. Through these failures I realized how few skills I had to navigate how I thought about and acted given my relative privilege in a situation where the context laid it palpably bare.

I turned to the *informed consent* required by my university's institutional review board—informing each participant that he/she would receive “no direct benefit” and that their participation in my study was voluntary. When I first filled out these forms it seemed like a safe reprieve. Hiding under what felt like the dense armor of university protocol, I did not have to think about giving back. Over time though, this armor felt thinner and increasingly flimsy. During the daily interactions, the months and months of participant observation, and what became years of relationships with people both in and out of my study site, how could I tell myself that I owed these people nothing? That they were truly participating without any expectations?

Although it did not come naturally for me at first, navigating my privilege in respectful and generous ways started to become easier after years of so-called mistakes and many feelings of guilt and frustration. A few years ago, I started changing the way I related to my power and privilege. I started to let go of the ways in which my different axes of privilege were coveted treasures to be guarded, or doled out in highly structured and carefully considered ways. I started letting go of the rationality with which I “distributed” the goods related to privilege. I started giving a lot more money—for emergencies, schooling, food, and more—on occasion to the point of indebting myself. I began more actively leveraging other axes of privilege beyond just money or language such as helping people network, write grants, set up interviews, navigate American bureaucracy, or learn how to use a computer or a software program. Perhaps most deeply changing, I started thinking less about my privilege and more about my presence. I started transitioning from being a development-machine to being a human being. This process influenced my interactions with people in my research sites. All my interactions with people, even those with scripted institutional review board introductions, started moving more freely. I started sharing my own family stories as I asked and heard about other people's personal stories. I started letting go of refocusing conversations to my principal research questions, and being open to having multiple hour-long discussions with people who asked me as many questions as I asked them—about my family, how I grew up, my philosophical or spiritual views, or my views on conservation. Most importantly, I started realizing that when I was wrapped up in my privilege and the desire to bring about “sustainable” change, I was ignoring the processes of giving and receiving, which are built upon humanity and trust. This trust is the foundation of cultivating relationships.

As my research questions and methods change over time, reflecting more of an all-encompassing life-process rather than mere field-based methodologies, I will continue to embrace the explicitly relational element of “doing research.” In the past few years I have committed more deeply to certain relationships I have with people who have also given a great deal to me. Some of these people are research assistants, host families, and research informants. Each of these relationships extended beyond the immediate situation that brought us together. They are now friendships. I have become part of people's families,

committed to providing long-term financial, informational, and emotional support that ebbs and flows in accordance with their (as well as my) needs and capacity. I have learned that the personal connections, the deeper relationships I have forged, lay at the heart of my research and now my identity as a researcher.

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