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Research Note:

The Researcher's Personal Pursuit of Balance Between Academic and Practical Contributions

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Note. This research note is part of the thematic section, Limits to Giving Back, in the special issue titled "Giving Back in Field Research," published as Volume 10, Issue 2 in the *Journal of Research Practice*.

While social science programs emphasize the ethics of reciprocity in field research, practical issues strongly condition the possibilities for mutual benefit. We know that research benefits the researcher, through experience, the development of sensibility and perception, the flexibility of conceptual construction, publications, and career advancement. We know that academic and host community expectations are always in tension, in some disciplines more than others. We know that thriving mutuality depends on the personality, discipline, and distance of the researcher, host capacities to influence and use the research endeavor, and the character of state mediation of the relationship. We know that effective relations require time to grow, typically on a different scale of time than academics can afford.

All of my graduate students, working predominantly in the political economy and political ecology of natural resources, are committed to achieving mutually beneficial relations in their field research. Most make sure that the text and data of their results are placed in the hands of those from whom these are drawn, a symbolic and respectful act. Fewer present their findings personally in gatherings at their research sites, providing

opportunity for discussion and reinterpretation that may trigger new ideas. Even fewer engage in effective participatory research that mutualizes and transforms the learning process. Rarest are researchers who produce results that make a concretely beneficial difference in people's lives.

In my experience, the best cases of mutualism arise when researchers choose to return to and remain in the context of their research for substantial durations of their career. This group includes researchers who study their home country and those who choose to migrate to the country of their research. In effect, the person embodies both the learning from the research and the relations that supported it; the choice of home embeds these processes in and transforms the research context. This appears to be true whether the research project was highly academic and abstract or highly engaged, participatory, and grounded.

Personality matters greatly in bounding the possible, and it needs to be respected. Any two people who start off with participatory intent will catalyze different relational patterns. In some cases, a "lone wolf" researcher may become quite isolated. In others, a researcher may become so engaged as to separate entirely from academic pursuits. Few have the special qualities that enable thriving buoyancy, even happiness, on the shifty tightrope between academic and popular cultures. As mentors, we want to nurture the possible, not prescribe one shoe to fit all.

Disciplines force forms on personalities. They have distinctive commitments to abstraction and particular theories. They have distinctive standards of "valid" data. The stronger and more specific these forces, the less latitude may exist for the relativism of engagement. But the authority of the work may enable a different kind of contribution, no less mutually beneficial than in a wholly engaged setting. As mentors, we need to understand the scope of a discipline and the organization of its work that generates mutual benefit.

A group of eight of my recent doctoral students once had the opportunity to travel together for a month among their field sites in South Asia, present their work, and hear related work by others, in academic and governmental meetings in various Indian universities as well as in community gatherings. Copies of dissertations were left in each host community and institution and in a central library in New Delhi. Learning within the group was immense as researchers experienced others' sites they had known only in distant seminars, and engaged local scholars who were doing related work. The benefits within India derived from the expression of and mobilization around significant work that had little prior visibility, organization, and influence. Academic and governmental relations that formed during the group's travels have endured. Although host communities were key parts in design of the tour, I do not believe they benefited directly unless "their own" researcher remained engaged in the community or broader affected patterns happened to touch it.

Other examples articulate the range of personal possibility. About ten of my students have undertaken participatory research within selected communities. A third of them

handled the tightrope balance between academe and community with elegance, albeit at the cost of additional years of work. A third fell off the rope toward its academic side, producing interpretations that were academically solid but did not ring true with, if they were presentable to, their hosts. Another third fell off the other side, committing themselves to community and non-governmental organizations without completing their research projects. The most obviously enduring contribution is by a researcher who, through special dedication and capacity, stayed on the rope for years, excelling in both cultures and sustaining her community and academic engagements without break.

The forms of “giving back” have varied tremendously among the hundred or so doctoral students with whom I have been directly involved. Some mined their data and departed without trace. A number have become powerfully beneficial forces in contexts to which they commit for their careers. Others have written from a distance in ways that influenced the education of actors who became directly and indirectly engaged in important work. Still others, influenced by the research learning they embody, have allocated financial resources among sectors, activities, and communities. There is no one way to give back. Indeed, the possibilities are as diverse as the personalities, settings, and disciplines involved.

There is still great pressure on researchers to be quick and be gone. The best of intentions are hammered by unrelenting schedules, financial needs, fortified disciplines, and sheer distance. We cannot assume that mutual benefit will happen, or is easy, or is reached by one or another course. We are challenged instead to encourage the particular forms that are possible for unique people and situations.

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