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# RESEARCH ASSISTANTS

## Invisible but indispensable in ethnographic research

**Text:** *Andrea Kaiser-Grolimund, Carole Ammann, Sandra Staudacher*

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### Research assistants: a blind spot

Until recently, anthropological literature on the collaboration between the researcher and his/her assistant(s) was rather scarce – although these helpers in the field are highly involved in our knowledge production. In PhD theses, where sole authorship is required for academic degrees, the work with assistants is mentioned briefly in the methodology parts, but then disappears again in the published books. Working with research assistants raises questions of authorship, authority and ethical considerations in general (Galizia and Schneider 2005: 8, Gupta 2014). In this contribution we argue that collaborations with research assistants strongly influence our data, its analysis and finally our ethnographic texts. Hence, we promote an ethnographic writing that thoroughly reflects working with research assistants and makes this collaboration more explicit.

The cooperative work with and the relationship to research assistants is one part of the social nature of anthropologists' knowledge production (Galizia and Schneider 2005: 7, Sluka 2007: 121, Gupta 2014: 397). Research assistants are not just simple field helpers; in fact they fit much more into Middleton and Prahdan's description: He or she «figures [...] as an interlocutor and «fixer» of ethnographic relations – not merely a worker *of* the field, but rather constitutive of the field itself» (Middleton and Pradhan 2014: 357, emphasis in original; cf. Middleton and Cons 2014: 280). Research assistants influence what we focus on,

where we spend time and with whom we speak; to sum up, they co-produce our data (Gupta 2014: 398-399, Middleton and Cons 2014: 283).

Due to their multiple roles, a general description of what characterizes a research assistant is difficult. According to our understanding their familiarity with the local context is of major importance because we rely especially on their cultural and linguistic translations. Generally, the collaboration between the research assistants and the anthropologists extends over a certain period of time. In the course of this cooperative work, both undergo a transformation in regard to their perception and comprehension of local circumstances. In our cases, we paid the assistants a salary and thus the relationships started as one of employers and employees, but, as the mutual understanding grew, our relations soon developed into friendship (cf. Gold et al. 2014: 333, Middleton and Cons 2014: 281-288).

In this contribution we reflect on our own experiences when working with research assistants in our anthropological PhD studies in East and West Africa. For all of us, working with research assistants was highly enriching. The goal of the following short inputs is twofold: First, we describe our daily collaborations with and learning from research assistants in the field. Secondly, in a more analytical part, we reflect on such teamwork, for example, on questions regarding authorship and the employer-employee relationship. All of us had to adapt our initial ideas on working with assistants based on methodological literature and experi-

ences of colleagues, when realizing the importance of our assistants' own social backgrounds (such as, age, sex, education, religion, and political affiliation), as well as their positions in the field.

### **Collaboration with research assistants in practice – three examples**

#### **Research assistants in Dar es Salaam: How background matters**

Andrea Kaiser-Grolimund's research assistants were essential for the whole process of her PhD project. In the course of her study on aging and health in the metropolitan city of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania she worked with different research teams. The changing composition of the teams seemed unfortunate at first but proved beneficial in the end, as it opened her eyes to the importance of the assistants' varying backgrounds and the resulting influences on the field research (cf. Hannerz 1976: 80). When Kaiser-Grolimund first started interviewing people above 60 years of age, Neema Duma<sup>1</sup> (in her mid-fifties) and Elisha Sibale Mwamkinga (in his mid-sixties) were supporting her. Both worked in non-governmental organisations (NGOs) concerned with old or vulnerable people. Hence, they had much more experience than the researcher in approaching older people.

When looking for assistants who are themselves already advanced in age and who are knowledgeable in working with older people, Grolimund may have underestimated their influence as NGO representatives, especially in the less privileged areas of Dar es Salaam. Many informants were formulating their claims and, in the interviews, represented themselves probably more deprived than they really were. An elderly woman for example, claimed to have nobody who cares for her and asked for NGO support during the interview, while the team later found out that she was well cared for by her daughter. In a subsequent research phase, when Duma had moved away from Dar es Salaam and Mwamkinga was busy with other jobs, Grolimund was lucky to be introduced to Monica Mandao and Frank Sanga (both in their mid-twenties). Both had just finished their bachelor's degrees in social science. While working with Mandao and Sanga, it was striking to Grolimund to observe how the interview situations changed. The older informants did not expect any help from students. The discussions often turned towards advising them – the younger genera-

tion – based on the seniors' life experiences, as for example to live a healthy way of life without drinking alcohol or to respect the elders. In addition to that, when the research team started to focus on a middle class milieu, it seemed that the informants perceived the assistants to have a similar social background and often the common ethnic origin of the assistants and informants was used to create familiarity. Similar to the description by Middleton and Cons (2014: 283), Kaiser-Grolimund and her assistants engaged in a kind of co-production – not only during the data generating process but also afterwards. They discussed field notes together and the exchange shaped the researcher's understanding of aging and health in Dar es Salaam. Furthermore, the expertise of Mwamkinga, who remained assistant and expert in the project, helped to refine the analysis of the data.

Kaiser-Grolimund's collaboration with assistants was especially demanding at the beginning due to changing research teams. Working with different assistants, however, opened her eyes to better reflect on the research assistants' influence in the research setting. Depending on the diverse backgrounds of assistants (and researchers, obviously) each situation is shaped and has to be analysed accordingly.

#### **Research assistants in Kankan: The situational importance of gender**

As Carole Ammann's project deals with the women-state nexus in Kankan, Guinea, she initially thought that a woman in her forties or fifties, who would have a respected place in society, would be best suited to act as a research assistant. She soon had to realise, however, that in Kankan women of that age hardly spoke French and usually had no spare time. Finally, Ammann collaborated with a male and a female research assistant: Thierno Sow, a young unemployed man, learned the basis of reading and writing during three years of school attendance. Djenabou Drame, a woman in her mid-twenties, had earned a bachelor's degree in political philosophy. Both of them grew up in Kankan.

Initially, the researcher met women together with Drame and men in Sow's company. But once, Drame could not be in Kankan for several days. As Ammann had already scheduled an important interview with an elderly woman, she decided to go to the appointment together with Sow. Surprisingly, the interview was very fruitful. Since then, Ammann no longer matched the gender of the research

<sup>1</sup> All our assistants agreed to be mentioned by their full names.

assistant with the one of the informants; established trust became more important than gender. If, for example, Drame was the contact person, the researcher usually worked with her regardless of the informant's gender. Therefore, Ammann started to choose according to the specific situation with whom to collaborate.

There were other significant advantages of being able to work with two assistants. First, by spending much time together, both of Ammann's assistants offered her invaluable insight into the lives of male and female youth. Secondly, discussions around certain topics could result in heated debates when Drame and Sow's opinion diverged. In these situations, the researcher learned a lot about local discourses and practices. Finally, each of them had their own strengths and weaknesses: Sow was very familiar with the city and its inhabitants. He was full of endless energy and soon understood and applied the different ethnographic methods. Over time, their mutual understanding grew: During interviews and informal conversations Ammann et al. often communicated non-verbally. However, Sow sometimes had difficulties translating the local languages into French. Furthermore, he became rather irritated if the interviewees did not directly answer the researcher's questions.

Drame had access to a large network and was familiar with the discourses and practices of the intellectual elite, but she could also easily talk to market women and people from the village due to her family background. At the beginning of their collaboration, she was convinced that interviews were the only appropriate tool to generate data. She had to learn the importance of hanging out, listening to informal conversations, paying attention to gossip and looking at people's practices for anthropological research (cf. Brand 2001: 315-317, Kaufmann 2013: 69). Hence, working with two quite different research assistants proved valuable as it put the researcher in a comfortable situation where she could choose with whom to work according to the specific setting.

### Research assistants in Zanzibar: An as much as possible equal collaboration

Over a period of more than three years Sandra Staudacher worked closely together with two young scholars from Zanzibar in order to gather data on health of and care for older people in the city of Zanzibar. She met the two junior lecturers in history, Saada Omar Wahab and Saleh Mohammed Saleh, when her research team visited their university, in order to find a cooperating local partner to obtain a research permit. The interest of the two historians in Stau-

dacher's research was the beginning of much more than an employer-employee relationship, however, it still remained within unequal power relations. Wahab and Saleh became officially employed by the project as research assistants and were involved in decisions as about in which areas of the city the research was conducted and how the research team chose informants. Furthermore, they helped to develop the interview questions. Wahab and Saleh were translating, talking to authorities and to the informants, as well as analysing and discussing observations and interviews.

The two research assistants, who have a master's degree like the researcher, introduced Staudacher to informants as a student doing her PhD study, while they presented themselves as lecturers teaching at their university. This was, on the one hand, a strategy to keep the informants' material wishes small but also showed, on the other hand, that they perceived themselves not as in an inferior position. The assistants advocated the research and it became a part of their own academic, social and political commitment. Being deeply involved in the research procedures, they heard countless stories of older people to the effect that they even initialized changes in the care of their own older relatives. Wahab and Saleh appreciated their participation in the research as a possibility to expand their knowledge and practice of doing ethnographic fieldwork, which sharpened their academic profiles. Both were talking at some point of the research about changing their PhD study aspirations towards social anthropology instead of history or at least to integrate ethnographic aspects into it.

Staudacher worked with highly qualified research assistants but could only temporarily employ and remunerate them as less qualified staff. In order to make a living, they were at the same time working at the University, where they had a stable position. As well educated and responsible family members with a relatively sound salary the two were not only busy with their jobs but also with various family duties. Accordingly, Staudacher could profit from skilled research assistants but had to handle their irregular availabilities.

Staudacher's research assistants had a very important role in the preparation and the gathering as well as in the analysis of the data, but gradually disappeared in the written thesis. Most authors of other ethnographic texts keep secret whether they worked with research assistants or not and joint authorship is still very rare. This blind spot might be due to the fear that the collaboration would reveal the deficiencies of the researchers' (language) skills to sufficiently understand the local context (Gupta 2014: 397-398, Middleton and Cons 2014: 285).

### Discussion: On authorship and other ethical considerations

Collaborating with research assistants raises various ethical considerations as the inequalities between the researcher and the researched people are mirrored in the relationship between the anthropologist and his/her assistant(s). These imbalances can be problematic – but do not necessarily have to: The assistants have to be at the researcher's disposal during the time of fieldwork but all too often remain unemployed once he or she has left. Another challenging issue is that the researcher pays his or her assistant(s) (Gupta 2014: 398). Payments can entail asymmetrical relationships between researchers and assistants, since the former earns much more than the latter. At the same time, researchers and assistants often collaborate in an amicable relationship. When the researchers finally depart, the assistants cannot leave the field (Middleton and Pradhan 2014: 364) and thus need to deal with the social consequences of the research. Finally, working for a researcher can strongly affect the assistants' future lives (Middleton and Cons 2014: 284). Grolimund's and Staudacher's assistants, for example, received regular phone calls of their older informants even after the research was done. And Ammann's assistants were charged higher prices than before, because people, having seen them with a foreigner, thought they were now wealthy.

Our examples also show that we should carefully choose our research assistants; being aware of the influence of their sex, age, and their familial, educational, religious, ethnic and political backgrounds. Further, researchers must remain flexible in their choice of and collaboration with assistants and react rapidly to various circumstances on the ground. Collaborations need constant reflection within the research team. Staudacher and Kaiser-Grolimund conducted a workshop with their assistants at the beginning of the data generating process in order to discuss potential methodological shortcomings. We propose to envision such workshops before, during and eventually even after the collaboration to address possible challenges of the researcher-assistant relationships.

Staudacher hints to another important but neglected factor in the collaboration with research assistants in anthropological projects: Assistants do not only provide essential support in data gathering, they also have a major impact on its interpretation. Peculiar to their role is, however, their disappearance in the process of writing up the findings. This raises questions about authorship and authority. For us, the process of data generation, data interpretation and writing

is a circular one and as Gupta emphasizes «the «raw data» is itself interpretative, relational, affective, and contextual» (Gupta 2014: 398). We should therefore reflect on the role of our research assistants in this second, more interpretative and analytical part of research. Hence, we have to be aware that «the ideas themselves have come from a complex history of interaction, negotiation and exchange [...]» (Middleton and Pradhan 2014: 358). A basic measure to improve the visibility of research assistants could be a mandatory section in each publication in which research assistants (as well as other collaborators) and the nature of their involvements have to be mentioned.

In brief, we plead for an anthropological writing that explicitly reveals the impact of research assistants in our projects – not only in a PhD thesis, but also in scientific books, edited volumes and articles. Or in the words of Middleton and Pradhan: «Incorporating their voices marks a definitive step in recognizing and perhaps getting beyond the «hidden colonialism» at hand so as to chart a more inclusive and innovative ethnography for the future» (Middleton and Pradhan 2014: 371-372).

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