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2021

https://doi.org/10.25595/3725

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Sander, Alena: *Producing Knowledge with Care : Building Mutually Caring Researcher-research Participants Relationships*, in: Femina politica : Zeitschrift für feministische Politik-Wissenschaft, Jg. 30 (2021) Nr: 1, 70–81. DOI: https://doi.org/10.25595/3725.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here: https://doi.org/10.3224/feminapolitica.v30i1.07

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Producing Knowledge with Care. Building Mutually Caring Researcher-research Participants Relationships

ALENA SANDER

Introduction

I had quit my job at a European development agency for which I had worked in the Global Souths for a couple of years, to start a doctoral thesis in the research project "Resistance to international prescriptions and injunctions in Africa and the Middle East today" in the beginning of 2017.[1] Thanks to the research project, I was now given the chance to study a phenomenon that had fascinated me during the time I had been working in the field of international development: the power relations between actors from the Global Norths and Southern actors inherent in the international development cooperation, and the (re)actions they provoke from the Southern side.

My research investigates how Jordanian women's organizations and their staff members resist to certain injunctions in the context of their cooperation with Western donors for the implementation of development projects. I view development through Foucauldian lenses, that is as a transnational neo-liberal discourse that creates knowledge about the so-called developed and under-developed, and which is translated into social reality for people in the Norths and the Souths (Escobar 2012 (1995)). This discourse builds on colonialism and racism, and continuously (re-)produces power asymmetries between the "West and the rest" (Hall 2011 (1993)), discursively putting Southern civil society organizations at the other end of the development power equation. From a Foucauldian perspective, knowledge is always political. Consequently, producing knowledge as a researcher is political, too. Researching power relations in development and individual acts of resistances to them, however, is even more political.

Because of the political character of my research, my positionality, that is, who I am as a researcher and as a person, informs and influences the questions that I ask, the work that I do, and the knowledge that I produce. On the one hand, I study women's organizations' resistances in the development contexts of Jordan through the perspective of the White European researcher that I undoubtedly am. This part of me comes with the heavy colonial baggage of Western research, that puts me at risk of reproducing a Eurocentric mode of knowledge production and thus, contributing "to interpretive bias, epistemological injustice, and other forms of harm" (Fang Law 2016, 525). On the other hand, I look into these resistances through the perspective of the intersectional feminist that I aspire to be not just as a researcher, but also in everyday life. This part of me is shaped by my personal experiences in this world. I believe in the positive impact of social change on all human beings, and wish to make a contribution to it.

 https://doi.org/10.3224/feminapolitica.v30i1.07

Coming from there, I critique the 'traditional' way of doing research in development studies, that is one conducted *on the other* and obsessed with an alleged objectivity mostly made in and by the West, which helps reproduce unequal power relations. Instead, I aim to conduct research *with*, *for* and *at the side of* people (Higginbottom 2008; Truman et al. 2000) through an approach that would allow me to consider myself as a part of my field and build meaningful relationships with my research participants. I argue against the idea of "science for science's sake" (Gjessing 1968, 397) and, instead, wish to have an impact on my field which my research participants would perceive as positive and useful. Ideally, this approach would not just give me normative guidance on how research *should* be conducted, but also accompany me as a practical guide.

My quest for such an approach led me to post-colonial, de-colonial, feminist and other qualitative participatory methodologies – and, finally, to the feminist theory of an ethics of care. Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto define care as an "activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible" (Fisher/Tronto 1990, 40). I suggest that the mutuality of the caring relationship, which is at the heart of their ethics of care, may be transferred to the researcher-research participants relationship, and make it more reciprocal, attentive, competent and responsive to the needs of all parties involved. It then may produce knowledge more useful and meaningful for those who helped constructing it. In this article, I show how this transfer may be done through the application of Tronto's and Fisher's four phases of an ideal act of care to my study. I do so through the example of a participant observation that I conducted with a Jordanian women's organization between October 2017 and December 2018 in Amman, Jordan, which was influenced and guided by these four phases.

I argue that the mutual caring approach comes handy to the field of development studies, which is presently raring to go through a de-colonial turn (Patel 2020; Ziai 2020; Cornwall 2020). The field is currently in need of self-reflective research practices that help shed light on the colonial power relations between researchers and research participants in general, and "the social relations, institutional arrangements, norms, and structures through which perceptions of difference and moral exclusion are created in the global system" (Robinson 1997, 114) in particular. With development researchers having started to put more emphasis on researcher positionality, power relations between researchers and their field and research ethics, Tronto's and Fisher's ethics of care complements other alternative participatory methodologies. It is an approach that is relatively easy to put in practice and helps "to frame reflective questions, to surface understanding of the political and justice aspects of research that may not be well acknowledged" (Brannelly/Boulton 2017, 348) like: Who benefits from our research? Who asks the research questions and why? How may we conduct research with discursively marginalized groups in a more respectful and attentive way?

This study is divided into five parts. Following this introduction, I dig deeper into Fisher's and Tronto's ethics of care. It illustrates how the approach differentiates

from dyadic caring approaches and positions itself within the broader perspective of participatory action research approaches (PAR). In the third part, I look into the example of my participant observation of a women's organization in Jordan, and present how I used Tronto's and Fisher's four phases of an ideal act of care in the form of four guiding questions in the course of my research. The fourth part discusses the three main lessons learned from applying the ethics of care approach to my research. Finally, I conclude this article with a discussion of how a feminist caring ethical research approach in particular may contribute to social change, and be an asset for development researchers who identify themselves with decolonial and feminist thought.

A Mutually Caring Relationship

The ethics of care is a normative ethical theory originally developed by the feminist researcher Carol Gilligan (1983). In her study on gender differences in moral reasoning between men and women, Gilligan identifies two ways of thinking ethically. The first way relies on the ethics of justice and rights, and emphasizes what is right, good and just. The second one relies on the ethics of care and focuses on maintaining healthy relationships and on questions of what is needed when, where and by whom to do so. Nel Noddings, who builds on Gilligan, asserts that care is when "the other's reality becomes a possibility for us (…) to eliminate the intolerable, to reduce the pain, to fill the need, to actualize the dream" (Noddings 1984, 14).

Noddings' definition of care has been criticized as a dyadic and top-down approach, viewing the caring-relation as a mother-child relationship that excludes others and builds upon a rigid power relation between the mother as the care-giver and her child as the care-receiver (Barnes 2015; Tronto 1993).

Many social researchers approach their research participants from such a dyadic caring perspective. Dyadic caring methodologies are practiced within different strands of qualitative research in general, and studies which include research with marginalized or vulnerable research participants in particular, as it is often the case in empirical development studies. They take into consideration researcher's positionality, personal experience and proximity to the field, but as an ethical challenge that the researcher should overcome or deal with (Eide/Kahn 2008; Dickson-Swift et al. 2006), rather than as a source of inspiration. They preach sensitive behavior when in contact with research participants (Collins/Cooper 2014), but for the sake of do-no-harm rather than out of mutual respect. Some promote taking care of and caring for their participants in the sense of doing them good (Collins/Cooper 2014; Rallis/Rossman 2010; Dickson-Swift et al. 2007; Gunzenhauser 2006; McCarthy Brown 1992) – but out of pity rather than of genuine interest or shared values, positions and objectives. Put differently, even though traditional qualitative methodologies plea for minimizing the distance between the researcher and her research participants (Karnieli-Miller et al. 2009), they presume that they belong to two different worlds

(Aluwihare-Samaranayake 2012), where only the researcher may be able to enter their world (Ceglowski 2000) but not the other way around.

With regard to my epistemological stance, as well as my personal experience with and critique towards development practice, it is unsurprising that the dyadic caring research approach, which mirrors the unequal Norths-/Souths-power relations that I criticize, did not appeal to me. Further readings on the notion of care, however, brought me to Tronto and Fisher. They present an alternative to Noddings' definition of care that highlights the interdependent and reciprocal relationship between the care-giver and the care-receiver. Tronto and Fisher identify four ideal elements of care: (1) "care about", that is concerned with being attentive to others' needs in order to reply to it; (2) "taking care of", that is recognizing and assuming responsibility in order to satisfy a specific need for care; (3) "care-giving", which describes the act of caring as a reaction to a specific need (which also implies that the care-giver has the competences and skills to satisfy this need) and (4) "care-receiving", which reflects the reciprocal and interdependent need between the care-giver and the care-receiver (Fisher/Tronto 1990, 40). In Caring Democracy (2013), Tronto furthermore develops a fifth element: "caring with", which requires that caring needs of care-receivers should be in line with "democratic commitments to justice, equality, and freedom for all" (Tronto 2013, 23).

The mutual caring-relationship that results from such a definition follows a one-world-approach, that is one, in which both the care-giver and the care-receiver live and interact. A world which they shape and build together from two sides of the same coin – even though in asymmetric forms (Pettersen 2011), that is through different social roles, and with different privileges and perspectives which may evolve and change over time and space. As a societal practice, the mutual caring approach therefore considers *all* humans as "vulnerable and not vulnerable at different points in their lives" (Tronto 2014, quoted in Visse, Abma et Widdershoven 2015, p. 167).

Applied to qualitative research, this implies that the researcher is viewed as a part of her field, at least to a certain extent, and therefore has a personal interest in contributing to making it a place in which we can all live as well as possible. This interest is not an altruistic or naïve one, nor is it born out of a "good Samaritan" or "White savior" complex (Madsen/Mabokela 2016, 155), a trap into which many researchers fall especially in the field of development studies. It is rather a genuine interest that is the consequence of looking at the world as interconnected and interdependent, and recognizing one's place in it. This demands an increased researcher reflexivity with a strong focus on needs, interests and agendas on both sides of the research process' coin (Harding 2012), with the goal to build "collaborative, reciprocal, trusting and non-oppressive relations" (Denzin, 1997, 273).

Following a mutual caring approach in qualitative research also implies activist forms of science that engage in political and societal transformation (Conradi 2015; Tronto, 1993) with the goal of "deconstructing current systems that fail communities so as to offer methods and possibilities to create more just, supportive systems"

(Novotny/Gagnon 2018, 74). The caring researcher does so at the side of her research participants (Plesner 2011).
Finally, caring for each other mutually in a research process also comes with the notion of responsibility, that is for each other, but also for the knowledge (co-)produced in the course of a research process. It allows, and even promotes close bonds between researchers and participants, based on common values and goals, mutual trust and respect (Tillmann-Healy 2003). Especially in research that involves a Norths-/Souths-component, the ethics of care emphasizes political action, including "breaking down the barriers of lay and expert knowledge and the importance of the relation of those involved" (Ward/Gahagan 2010, 212).
The mutual caring research approach as it is used here clearly positions itself within participatory action research (PAR). PAR approaches draw researchers' attention to understanding, mutual involvement, social change, and a process that promotes personal growth (Kidd/Kral 2005). As the production of "knowledge and action directly useful to a community" (Reason 1994, 43), PAR "encourages the co-production of knowledge by academic (researchers) and (non-academic) local groups in a collaborative (co-)research process" (Schurr/Segebart 2012, 148). Therein, the mutual caring research approach does not claim to be an approach of its own. It rather nestles itself up against existing PAR approaches. It puts the spotlight on a particular feminist mindset with which a researcher who implements a PAR-project may approach and construct her field. It paves a way in which PAR may be practiced (Mason 2015) and on an epistemological approach to PAR (Cahill 2007) that "provides us with a novel reading of human relations" (Pettersen 2011, 52). This necessarily influences the way of producing knowledge and the kind of knowledge we produce within PAR and beyond.
To make the mutual caring approach operational for qualitative research in development studies, I developed four leading questions from my understanding of Fisher's and Tronto's definition of an ethics of care and their four phases mentioned above. They guided me through my research process, and I came back to them at various stages. These are:

1. What are my and my research participants' specific needs and priorities with regard to the overall topic of my research?
2. How am I, as a researcher, responsible to satisfy these needs?
3. What can I, as a researcher and with the competences and resources I have, do to satisfy my research participants' needs?
4. What needs to be done to make my research more reciprocal, participant and equal?

In the following, and by drawing from notes from my research diary, I will show how these questions are reflected in my practice throughout my research with a Jordanian women's organization.

Studying Norths-/Souths-cooperation through a Mutual Caring Research Approach

I came to Amman in October 2017, not for the first time in my life, but for the first time in the context of my study. I was only given a couple of weeks to explore how Jordanian organizations cooperated with Western donors, and to narrow down my rather broad research interest to more specific research questions. In the over 40 conversations I conducted with government officials, politicians, human rights activists and staff members of civil society organizations as well as donor representatives, I had the chance to listen to various standpoints and stories from very different people expressing various *needs*. All of them were interesting, all of them justified – and all of them could have become the centerpiece of my research. However, I was especially drawn to the stories told by staff members of several Jordanian women's organizations.

The situation of Jordanian women's organizations seemed complex. They cooperated with Western donors and identified with international development and women's rights standards. They financially depended on their donors, and simultaneously looked for partnerships with them. They often felt underestimated, misunderstood or unfairly treated by them, and denounced certain practices. For example, donors did not share budget control over projects, or reserved a veto for important decisions. At the same time, donors with whom I discussed complained about the difficulties they encountered when cooperating with these organizations. For example, the organizations did not always respect contracts and terms or missed deadlines. Both parties expressed their frustration of working with each other. Both equally emphasized that they wanted to improve their relationship to increase the quality and outcome of the development projects they implemented, which they considered extremely important.

I was intrigued – and absolutely wanted to dig deeper into this relationship. With regard to my interest in women's rights and feminist activism, my personal experiences as a development practitioner and my feminist values, this may seem unsurprising. Approaching my attraction to this topic through the mutual caring approach, however, also made me reflect upon my personal needs and agenda in studying, writing about and ideally having a positive impact on the cooperation of women's organizations and their Western donors. Indeed, conducting this research did not only satisfy my need for data in order to be able to write a thesis and foster my career. I also wanted it to satisfy my need to reflect upon, understand and contribute to change certain inequalities inherent to the cooperation of women's organizations and donors, of which I had been an integral part as an aid worker, and continue to be a part as a researcher and producer of the knowledge that underpins these inequalities.

After my first field trip, I took some time to reflect on my *responsibility* in the context of my study. I came to the conclusion, that I am responsible for how I do research and how I represent my research participants through my study. Traditionally, in so-

cial sciences, this responsibility includes doing no harm to my research participants, for example by keeping the aftermath of the study in mind. In my case, this was, amongst others, the fact that the women's organizations I would deal with had to continue their cooperation with their donors after my study would end, while I could leave the field and the contacts I made if I needed to. As an outsider, I decided that I was responsible to strategize, discuss and plan the study together with my research participants from Jordanian women's organizations. I also came to convince myself that I was not responsible to "fight their fight", when it comes to changing the relationship they entertained with their donors. What I was responsible for, however, was how I would position myself. I decided to join their cause as a researcher ally (Maynard et al. 2020; Jaworsky 2019), putting my research, my skills and resources, as well as certain privileges that I might have, at their disposal.

My second stay in Amman took place from October to December 2018 during which I observed staff members of one women's organization through an open participant observation. I was given the role of an intern. As such I accompanied staff members to meetings with donors or conferences, and participated in the daily work routine of the organization. On my first day, I had a discussion with the organization's director. She asked me: "So we're giving you data, good. But what can you do for us?" I remember her looking surprised when she realized that I was excited for being asked that question. I explained my mutual caring approach to her. I told her that I already felt taken well cared of by her and her colleagues, and that I was now looking to put my *competencies* and *resources* at their disposal, if they wanted. For example, I explained that, as a researcher, I am trained to see the extra-ordinary in the ordinary and to collect, analyze and interpret data. I am also an intermediary between the women's organization and their donors, in the sense that I can ask the donors uncomfortable questions in the name of research. The director smiled. "Can you conduct a separate study for us about the challenges, opportunities and best practices of the organization's cooperation with its donors?", she asked. She had always wanted to do something alike, but never had the time to do it herself. Since I was offering my help, she wanted to seize the opportunity. I was puzzled – a supplementary study was not what I had expected. I had hoped, probably too naïvely, that her organization could simply benefit from the thesis I would write. She looked at me as if she saw my brain rattling. "What do you think, can you do this for us?", she insisted. I finally nodded. Ten minutes later, I started the work.

The study was planned together with two staff members of the organization. We decided that it should dig deeper into the cooperation both the organization and its donors wanted to build and the challenges that came with it. The two staff members being busy with the organization's everyday business, helped me organize meetings with their colleagues and donor representatives, but let me do the interviewing. The donors welcomed the initiative. They took the time to discuss with me, even though I was transparent about the fact that the study may not be shared with them, depending on the findings and on the decision of the women's organization. I also took over

interview transcription and the first round of analysis, for which I used Thematic Analysis (Braun/Clarke 2012). Although I emphasized anonymity, I discussed my research findings in the making with the staff members of the organization, especially where I thought I had found patterns. We thereby co-constructed the study's results together, at least to a certain extent. The discussions with the two staff members of the organization took place between meetings, in the car or at the lunch table, but also in two separate meetings that we dedicated solely to the interpretation of the results.
At the end of my research stay, I discussed the final study findings with the director of the women's organization and the same two project managers. The director and the project managers were satisfied, not simply because the study "proved their point", but because it proved their point from an outside and scientifically grounded approach and in a way that valued their opinions and *participation*. They complimented my research approach, which they perceived as inclusive and transparent. The next step was to share the results of the study with the organization's donors and to hold a workshop to improve the relationship between the women's organization and the donors. However, shortly after this meeting, the director contacted me. She explained that she decided not to share the findings with their donors, at least for now. She was afraid that some could misunderstand them, which could harm their cooperation. My first reaction was the desire to convince her of the opposite. But I held myself back, accepting the decision with a heavy heart – this was not the outcome *I* wished for. Until today, the study and its findings have not been shared with the donors.

A Journey of Learning and Unlearning

Embarking on the journey of conducting research through a mutual caring perspective involves the learning of new reflexes, and the unlearning of antiquated top-down research approaches to researcher-research participants relationships. It may be perceived as challenging from the researcher's perspective. In my case, it resulted in two major lessons learned.
Firstly, the mutual caring approach may not come to the researcher as naturally as she may expect. She may have to actively work on developing a "care thinking" (Barnes 2012, 2), that is consistently integrating mutual caring into her everyday (research) practice. I, personally, understood that part and parcel of my background was not just my personal experience in development combined with the readings and discussions of feminist, post-colonial and de-colonial literature which pushes me towards wanting to conduct research differently. Growing up and receiving education in some of the richest countries of the Global Norths, is equally a part of me, and needs constant reflection. Putting the mutual caring research approach into practice meant, at least for me, unlearning the top-down approaches which are part of my social upbringing. That includes learning to fully accept and live with unexpected demands from research participants. For example, when the organization's director asked me to conduct a study, which I had perceived as a supplementary work at first.

It finally became an opportunity for me to put my mutual caring approach into practice. It also involves accepting certain decisions, such as the one of the organization's director of not wanting to share the study with their donors, even though I had hoped for a different, more spectacular outcome.

Secondly, the mutual caring research approach relies on a paradox. As the term *mutual* implies, the approach involves relationships being nourished from both sides of the research process' coin. However, coming to the field with the goal to establish such mutual relationships with one's research participants usually involves initial action taken by only one side – the researcher. She thereby remains at the center of decision-making on how to approach her field. This, however, leads to a dilemma: Whereas the researcher may conduct her study by approaching the relationships she builds as mutual, her research participants do not necessarily have to do the same. Instead, and exactly because the approach is based on trust and respect, the researcher may be obliged to accept that her vis-à-vis may not be interested in building the relationship she initially had in mind to build. Even more, it is questionable whether the members of the women's organization cared more about me than they did about other researchers who came by in the past and who may have used more traditional, less caring research approaches. This is at least partly due to the fact that relation building usually relies on a resource that is increasingly scarce for researchers: time. Consequently, I personally learned to use the ethics of care as *my* approach to the field and the people with whom I conducted research, trying not to expect much in return from my research participants. This was a difficult lesson learned, as it also implied accepting that one of the expectations that *I* brought to the research project – namely having a visible positive impact on the cooperation between the organization and their donors – would not be encountered immediately. Finally, I learned to accept that the approach is rather an ideal we may want to strive for – an ongoing process which may not be completed by the end of one's research project in which the journey itself is the reward.

Conclusion

Conducting research through a mutual caring research perspective puts the relationship between the researcher and her research participants at the heart of research practice. It is a one-world approach that emphasizes interdependence and reciprocity, without masking the privileges and inequalities which may lie on both sides of the research relationship? Studies conducted by Western development researchers who often apply a dyadic caring perspective to their Southern fields may benefit from the mutual caring research approach. This is especially because it is accompanied by a journey of learning to unlearn in order "to forget what we have been taught, to break free from the thinking programs imposed on us by education, culture, and social environment, always marked by the Western imperial reason" (Tlostanova/Mignolo 2012, 7).

To conclude, the way in which my application of the mutual caring research approach contributed to social change, the motive that initially drew me to the ap-

proach, was unexpected: My impact on the power relations between the Jordanian women's organization and their donors seems to be almost negligible. Furthermore, even though my research participants seemed to enjoy the way they were involved in the study, and gave positive feedback, it remains questionable if the relationships built during it were as reciprocal as I had initially hoped for. This may be the biggest shortcoming of the approach, at least within the configurations of *my* research project. Finally, the impact the approach had on myself, however, was astonishing. I started out with the illusion of already being a researcher-ally to my research participants by wanting to do research differently. Conducting research through the lenses of the mutual caring approach however shed light on my personal shortcomings and socio-colonial baggage which influence the way I do research and the knowledge I produce. The approach opened a door to a new process of self-decolonization, during which I had to ask myself questions like: Why is it so important for me to do research differently, to build reciprocal relationships with my research participants? Why was it so difficult for me to accept that my research participants decided not to share our study's result with their donors? This process of self-decolonization is still ongoing – and is painful at times. It is one that is necessary to produce knowledge in a more inclusive way in the future, and one that more and more development scholars are going through as the decolonial turn proceeds within the field. In order to create new and better practices of doing development research differently, mutually caring approaches may help researchers in three ways: Firstly, in reflecting upon their personal positioning with regard to their research participants, who are often from the Global Souths. Secondly, in challenging Norths-Souths-power relations not just within development practice, but also within research. And thirdly, in equipping them with reflective ways of using knowledge production as a means to repair our world, not *for* one's research participants, but together *with* them in respectful cooperation.

Note

1 I am grateful for Elena Aoun's, Florence Degavre's and Amanda Grittner's, as well as for the reviewers' constructive inputs and thoughts.

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