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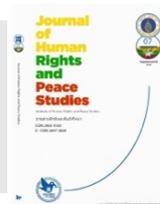
ARTICLE REVIEW

The Challenge of Bias in Human Rights Field Work: Navigating the politics of human rights knowledge production

James L. Cavallaro and Meghna Sridhar "Reducing Bias in Human Rights Fact-Finding: The Potential of the Clinical Simulation Model to Overcome Ethical, Practical, and Cultural Tensions in 'Foreign' Contexts" Human Rights Quarterly, Volume 42, Number 2, May 2020: pp. 488-512

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The inequality in knowledge production is one of the profound challenges facing the university and the human rights sector simultaneously. Many argue that how research on human rights gets done, and what is considered human rights academic practice, is often decided in places distant from where the human rights issues live. It is of concern to Western organizations who are sensitive to the ethical and rights-based dilemmas of researching and

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speaking for violated people and their communities. It is frustrating for local[2] organizations who may not have the resources, or may lack the voice to contribute to the understanding of the violations. In a recent Human Rights Quarterly article, James L. Cavallaro and Meghna Sridhar outline their response to this dilemma through a training of advocates to better prepare them for fact finding and documenting violations in the field.[3] The article explores the ethical challenges in human rights fieldwork caused by this inequality around knowledge production. They identify issues arising from the ground such as ensuring consent or dealing with trauma, and more structural concerns around power relationships in the field. What is important about this article is how it identifies and delivers concrete responses to these problems.

In the paper the authors describe their response, which is the Stanford Clinical Simulation, a week long immersive activity for students where they are placed in a simulation for three days, having to collect data from many actors, and complete a documentation study. The objective, the authors outline, is for students to increase their competency in a range of skills including communication, cultural competence, and for them to "begin to understand their work as community-centered, sensitive, compassionate, and driven by the need to serve" (507). The article is important because of strength of its criticism of current human rights field research. They argue it is flawed because of power hierarchies, inappropriate interventions and disrespect (489) leading to individual bias in the field. These are certainly critical issues which have been poorly addressed in methodology and practice in human rights research. But perhaps both the problems and the response by the authors is too grounded institutionally in the Global North. This in no way negates its importance and value, but some hopefully useful contexts can be added to this analysis. In particular, the mapping of the field based on dominant Western organizations may be expanded to include the many different smaller and

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[2] This article follows the basic structure of the review article in distinguishing between the 'West,' which is broadly the people and organizations from the Global North, and 'local' meaning people and organizations in the Global South. Undoubtedly these terms are problematic and simplistic, but necessary to discuss the relationship of power and knowledge production.

[3] While the terms of human rights research, advocacy, documentation, fact finding, are all distinct practices in the field, this short paper (and the article under review) assumes they are similar and be categorized under human rights knowledge production.

local bodies contributing to the human rights discourse, and also highlight the various positions people (whether Western of not) take within this more complex field. Secondly, a response which focusses on fieldwork practice will solve the important problem of bias in the field, but the structures creating the bias and power inequalities may be left untouched. A larger discussion is needed about how relationships of power, whether economic, cultural, or institutional contribute to the inequality of knowledge production

There has been much written on the global infrastructure of human rights being largely western and elite. Cavallaro and Sridhar considers that "the positionality of human rights organizations as predominantly elites from the Global North creates a problematic power dynamic that may result in the entrenchment of inequality by researchers who seek to combat injustice" (493). This is due to, in part, "traditional human rights organizations continue to be saturated with employees of Western and elite educated, often legal, backgrounds" (497). There is an unequal power dynamic of often richer western organizations, funding bodies, and universities having control over knowledge production, but a simple binary of Western and local does not capture the complexity of the field, and as a result, the different ethical issues which arise. It is important not to oversimplify the problematic power relationship. A initial critical concession is that it is not western organizations alone creating the bias. Organizations from the Global South have the capacity to do unethical research, to create bias findings, and to entrench power imbalances. People from the Global South working for local organization also have their own social, cultural, and political biases. This can be anything from a distrust of unionized labour, to homophobia, to gender bias, to seeing children as property, and so on. Human rights field work involves working with the most marginalized groups, and these groups may be just as marginalized from the elite in their own societies are they are from the West. The power dynamic between the person in the field and a western researcher or a worker from a local NGO may not be that much different. Problems may be compounded when the blame for bias is placed on western organizations, and as a result the local discrimination does not get addressed. In the worst cases, local organizations may avoid criticism by sheltering under the claim that it is Wester insensitivity, and thus not a valid.

The problem can be inadvertently exacerbated in the proposed Stanford Clinical

Simulation by emphasizing westerner's researchers are "community-centered, sensitive, compassionate, and driven by the need to serve" because it may re-inforce an unwillingness to highlight and respond to discrimination within the Global South. It is not uncommon to hear stories from Western interns at local organizations of witnessing discrimination or unethical behaviour, but for them to be unwilling to address this because it will show them as being insensitive or destructive. The skill here is for any researcher is to be confident that when they criticise any organization, Western or local, that it is a valid intervention and not a cultural bias. This dilemma is a challenging one. For example, a Western researcher may see it important to call out homophobia in a local organization because it means the quality of the knowledge produced or service provided is affected. But that criticism may create distrust or weaken local responses causing a worsening of human rights standards.

Problems such as these are perhaps outside of the scope of the immersive field training provided in the Stanford Clinical Simulation. The simulation should be a valuable learning opportunity and it will resolve ethical issues at the level of the field. But there are broader structural problems facing human rights knowledge production. In a way the training itself shows one problem: that of resources. A training where people are immersed for days in a hands-on simulation where participations get accurate, practical, and high quality learning outcomes is both expensive and needs exceptional knowledge and skill resources. This is something out of reach for all but the most well-resourced academic programs and organizations. That western organizations can produce such skilled knowledge workers could contribute to, and not reduce, the inequality in knowledge production. The answer obviously is not to stop programs such as this, but think of ways its benefits can be more equitably distributed.

A related issue is the focus on practical ethics in the field. While these skills are compulsory in any field research training, they alone will not eliminate bias (and to be clear the authors do not claim they do). The problem is no so much that Westerners don't have sensitivity or compassion (in fact many argue that have too much of these), but that they have the resources and access to produce knowledge, and with that comes the ability to determine the knowledge of the rights, the parameters of ethical research, and the desired response.

Keeping these (often young) researchers who may graduate from the Stanford Clinical Simulation out of the field is not the answer. These young researchers often energize the field. A number of human rights organizations and university programs from the Global South use these same young researchers as interns, or enrol them as students. They are often skilled, have good English language ability, and they are free (though there is a much larger debate about the use of unpaid interns), enabling organization to take on projects or activities they may not be able to without this extra resource. While there are issues of human rights knowledge production at the individual level, it is not simply that the researcher is Western. While these young researchers may contribute to the problem of bias, they may not be significant in it.

A final issue is that Cavallaro and Sridhar's article is quick to map out a field of western organizations dominating in human rights work, but this does not include some often hidden and critical bodies. Some regions are rich with local human rights NGOs with longer and stronger histories than Western NGOs. For example, many Southeast Asian countries have a long-standing and vibrant civil society with an impact greater than their western partners. But perhaps for reasons of language, or inability to access venues such as the United Nations, the knowledge of these organizations only reaches a limited audience in the West. In addition, in most mappings of human rights organizations one very important actor is neglected: The University. In the dynamic field of human rights knowledge production, the University is an important actor particularly around issues of field work, ethics, and training. Human rights has spread through universities in Africa, Asia, and Latin America in recent decades. There are many professional oriented human rights programs training students, and mainly human rights defenders are graduates of these programs. The claim that "structured training for human rights advocates undertaking international fieldwork is relatively scarce" (495) may be true in North America, but it is debatable if this is the case in regions such as Asia. Often it is assumed that human rights training is done by large civil society organizations, when the trend is for people to gain training though one of the many university programs. Of relevance here, university programs tend to address topics of research ethics and power dynamics in the field, which is the subject of Cavallaro and Sridhar's article.

Responding to bias in human rights research demands the kind of activities found in simulations like those at Stanford. Though the problem is not solved by ending Western dominance in the field. While there are obvious inequalities of power in the production of knowledge, it is not simply that all the organizations exist in the West, nor that bias and inequality is produced only from the West. There is still much to understand in the politics of knowledge and power in human rights work.