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Participation, inclusion and reflexivity in multi-step (focus) group discussions

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Abstract

Top-down, extractive research approaches are increasingly challenged in social studies, particularly by communities in the Global South. However, methodological stagnation persists as systemic academic pressures and a wider lack of social change hinder researchers from engaging in long-term transformative studies. We discuss multi-step context-building focus group discussions (FGDs) within a 'methodology *as* practice' approach (Hui, 2023), emphasising collaboration, openness and integration of diverse approaches. Our discussion explores collaboration among researchers and participants and links elements of feminist, decolonial, and slow scholarship approaches. This paper draws on experiences applying a cross-comparative approach (INITI8), which combines community-based participant observation (CBPO) with FGDs in water security research in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, and Kenya. We critically discuss the tensions and resulting re-work related to (1) the power of the elite both in our North–South collaboration and in collaboration with participant group leaders in the study sites; (2) socio-spatial inclusion implications of our research design decisions in defining peri-urban areas and engaging with illiterate women in rural areas; and (3) multi-level reflexivity through the positionality of researchers, collaborative reflexivity in analysis and process, reflexivity of participants, and reflexivity on the overall study recognising its positioning within entrenched colonial epistemologies.

KEYWORDS
academic system pressures, community-based participant observation (CBPO) approach, context-building methodology, decolonial epistemology, focus group discussions, Global South

1 | INTRODUCTION

Extractive top-down approaches in social studies are increasingly challenged by researchers and by communities who engage with research. Simultaneously, existing systemic pressures make changes difficult, resulting in 'methodological stasis' (Ndhlovu, 2021) that sustains epistemological hegemonies and persistence of certain methods. Focus group discussions (FGDs) are frequently used at the initial stages of a study, yet this method itself is not often critically discussed (Hopkins, 2007), especially when used for the purpose of building contextual understanding. Emerging scholarship re-imagines FGDs to be empowering (Ljunggren et al., 2010; Mkandawire-Valhmu & Stevens, 2010), meaningful (Padan et al., 2022), creative (Bailey, 2008), ethically appropriate and decolonial (Keikelame & Swartz, 2019; Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). Grounded in this literature, our goal in this paper is to discuss how we have worked on 'bridge-building' to feminist and decolonial methodologies through a multi-step collaborative FGD process within a 'methodology *as* practice' frame (Hui, 2023).

Hui (2023) argues that a move away from static conventional and dominant (post)positivist approaches must happen in alignment with complex social change. This view supports 'methodological approaches devoted to finding connections, points of confluence, and opportunities for transfer of concepts' (Ndhlovu, 2021, p. 199). Such approaches resist fractionation in ways of knowing and instead seek methodological innovation through bridge-building, openness and a 'toolkit approach' (Hui, 2023). Hui proposes that pathways towards decolonising research in practice begin with exploring how methods and their underpinnings are interlinked, by scrutinising methodologies *as* practices: planning, doing, collaborating and analysing unequal distribution of skills. Building on these insights, we discuss the integration of principles from various approaches in the execution of a multi-step FGD process. Moreover, we further explore methodology *as* practice, examining both collaboration within the diverse research team and with the participants.

In response to extractive and colonial research processes, alternative epistemologies have been emerging (Adams, 2014). Participatory approaches, rooted both in Northern and Southern traditions (see overview in Farias et al., 2017), emphasise transformative research (Freire, 2021 [1992]) and partnership with respondents at all stages of research (Beazley & Ennew, 2006; Cahill et al., 2007; Pain & Francis, 2003). Decolonial approaches advocate for structural transformation at different levels, including asking critical and uncomfortable questions on knowledge construction, interpretation, dissemination and benefits (Connell, 2014; Eichbaum et al., 2021; Keikelame & Swartz, 2019; Morton Ninomiya et al., 2020). Intellectual decoloniality aims to destabilise colonial legacies in research environments, acknowledge historical and political power relations at all levels, and engage with pluriversalities of knowing and being instead of prioritising Western Eurocentric universalism (Adams, 2014; Affun-Adegbulu & Adegbulu, 2020; Padan et al., 2022; Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). Some authors also examine how participatory and decolonial approaches can be joined, for example, community-based participatory research (CBPR) aims to solve diverse community problems through collaboration at all stages, including designing the study, managing the project and identifying solutions (Igwe et al., 2022).

It is crucial that these epistemologies are accompanied by systemic social change and not oversimplified (Moosavi, 2020); however, in practice, such change is hampered by the limited sphere of influence of research and by challenges in forecasting the unintended consequences of attempts to make change (Stroh, 2015). At times, these unintended consequences reinforce the problems that change efforts aimed to address. For example, methods evolving from rapid rural appraisal and participatory rural appraisal (Chambers, 1994) have been criticised for reinforcing oppressive social power structures, overburdening people without empowering them, and being insensitive to local politics and contexts (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Mohan & Stokke, 2000; Pain & Francis, 2003). Moreover, systemic pressures within research institutions, such as, colonial curricula, unequal processes of funding, and the race to the bottom within academia (Caretta & Faria, 2020; Mountz et al., 2015), have been major stumbling blocks for participatory and decolonial research in practice.

We are a mixed group of researchers with varied geographic and disciplinary backgrounds doing studies in communities affected by poverty in water insecure regions of Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Kenya. We established a North–South collaboration (see elaboration in the methodology paper of the project in Charles et al., Forthcoming) with the aim of conducting ethical research. To achieve this, we needed to critically ask, how can we challenge key elements of extractive research? Taking the community-based participatory observation (CBPO) approach (Roque et al., 2023) as a starting point, we explored which principles we could further rework.

By incorporating FGDs within the CBPO approach, we developed INITI8, a multi-step group discussion method for systematic context-building. In this paper, we explore the power of the elite, socio-spatial inclusion, and incorporation of reflexivity in FGD design and practice. We do not claim that our work exclusively originates in, nor is sufficient for, decolonial thought. We reflect on how creative modification of methods can challenge extractive approaches in practice.

2 | MULTI-STEP FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS (INITI8)

While context-building FGDs are common in research, their position within the overall study approach is rarely discussed. Potentially that is due to the bricolage tradition of qualitative research, combining methods depending on need (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Working collaboratively from four countries on the topic of household water insecurity in rural, urban, and peri-urban Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Kenya, we developed the INITI8 method: an eight-step modification of Roque et al.'s (2023) CBPO approach. CBPO aims to bridge participatory and observation studies through asking participants to fill out forms under the guidance of a group leader. At the heart of the CBPO method is positioning community members as the observers who record field notes. In INITI8, we focused instead on developing FGDs while also adding additional steps like social mapping (Table 1).

3 | POWER OF THE ELITE

The power of the elite in the research process starts with uneven control over funding and knowledge asymmetries, including which types of knowledge are prioritised. It continues with the unequal power balance between participants and researchers, the latter holding decision-making power for sampling design, data collection, question setting, and analysis. The composition of our team reflects the common imbalance of power in North–South collaborations, with researchers from the North being more advanced in their careers and leading the process, while researchers from the South being more responsible for data collection. This division of roles, the relatively fast speed we needed to move forwards, and the constraints of resources available to us made a slow research and slow mentoring approach (Caretta & Faria, 2020) largely out of reach. Drawing from Lund and Saito-Jensen's (2013) suggestion to evaluate dynamics and power imbalances of whole projects in relation to inclusion of the 'elite', we considered the implications of our ways of working. We agreed to articulate and respect individual priorities for career advancement, enabling and valuing that we each contribute to the research in different ways and require different forms of support to pursue our career objectives, such as lead-authoring a paper, developing a skill, and building professional connections.

The challenge during the fieldwork was the risk of promoting local elitism (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Farias et al., 2017; Leder et al., 2019) in our selection of participants and particularly the group leaders. While we justified the worth of 3 weeks of fieldwork in each country to complete the INTI8 process *before* starting to collect our core research data, we had to make choices during the process to comply with the time and scope constraints of our project (see also: Mountz et al., 2015). We committed to scrutinising benefit distribution through participation in a paid study by asking how we can understand and minimise the presence of 'elite capture' (Lund & Saito-Jensen, 2013).

After multiple debates, we agreed to adapt to contextual hierarchies and resultant expectations through variable styles of collaboration with the local elite, to clearly advocate for our exclusion/inclusion criteria and be mindful of the tensions between elitism and participation. In rural Kenya, government and communities expect researchers to approach the local chiefs prior to commencing research (Mutua & Kiruhi, 2021). The chiefs serve both as local gatekeepers and enablers; in this context, our group leaders were typically village headsmen or local administrators. In Ethiopia, we held initial discussion with local government officials and reached agreement to choose group leaders ourselves, after multiple walks and informal talks in public places in the community (we chose teachers and long-standing community members). In Bangladesh, at one study site, in accordance with local expectations, we recruited group leaders who were already established in community leadership roles, having been appointed and received training from United Nations agencies and the local government. At another site, we recruited young enthusiastic women who were not yet established as powerful figures in their communities, potentially strengthening their leadership capabilities and status. In all cases, we were careful that our participants' lists were not made of only leaders' next of kin or representative of one social group. We either created two lists (from a leader and a researcher) that we would discuss and merge, or we started with a list from the leader and discussed each suggested participant regarding specific inclusion criteria. Above all, we were clear that the INTI8 engagement aimed to gather initial data for context building, not to be interpreted as wholly representative.

4 | SOCIO-SPATIAL INCLUSIVITY AT DIFFERENT STAGES

Taking feminist perspectives in understanding how researchers and respondents relate to space and are politically subjected has shaped methodology *as* practice, collaboration and ontology. Space is 'a complex [gendered] web of the

TABLE 1 The eight steps of the INITI8 approach, inspired by the community-based participatory observation (CBPO) approach of Roque et al. (2023).

No.	Title	Description
1	Identifying and training group leaders	The researchers seek people to coordinate and lead the process. For each study site, they aim to engage one woman and one man who have lived in the community for at least 10 years, have good knowledge about community processes, and are literate. Conditions of the process and group leader renumeration are discussed and agreed
2	Selecting participants	The researchers and group leaders (men and women separately) select participants. They aim for people who are knowledgeable about the community and literate if possible. The participant engagement process and remuneration are agreed
3	Community social mapping	Meeting together as a group, the participants have a chance to walk through their community, observing and talking with each other to collaboratively draw a social map to identify important infrastructure, socio-geographical divisions, insecurity hotspots and vulnerabilities
4	Participant training and take-home survey form filling	The leaders and researchers train participants on filling out take-home survey forms. The participants fill out self-administered survey forms within a few days to a week. They are encouraged to answer questions in any way (including using proverbs and songs) and to seek support from community members of the same gender. The group leaders and researchers support the process
5	Reviewing the forms	The researchers review the survey forms to develop a group discussion guide for each community
6	Group discussion/FGD–The core focus of the approach	Men and women participants meet separately for discussion. The discussion delves deeper into questions that were insufficiently answered in the survey form. Several questions ascertain participants' interests and priorities, such as, 'What questions were most interesting to you? Which were unimportant?'
7	Repeating the process with marginalised groups individually	Adjusting different steps with the marginalised groups, e.g., repeating steps 4 and 5 and the group discussion; or developing other variations
8	Analysis	The survey forms and group discussion recordings are translated, transcribed, coded and analysed by the researchers. The analysis informs further development of the research

Note: Grey shade indicates group discussion is the core focus of the method.

relation of domination and subordination, of solidarity and co-operation' (Massey, 1994, p. 265). During the study, violent conflicts erupted in Ethiopia, challenging collaboration, learning and progress. We held frequent discussions on risks, creative modifications of methods, and support for our Ethiopian co-authors and participants who continued to want to be 'included' in the research.

In the fieldwork, making epistemological decisions informed by spatial considerations has shaped the data. For example, definition of a peri-urban area is commonly ambiguous and biophysical parameters are not satisfactory (Sahana et al., 2023). Acknowledging that embodied experiences of natural environments influence the way people understand themselves in relation to society and the state (Sultana, 2009, 2020), we have also included socio-spatial criteria, such as, access to jobs, perception of being on the periphery of urban development, and perception of in-betweenness in water projects, which is typical for peri-urban residents. We also considered inclusion through the perspective of safety and sensitivity by creating gender-separated places for discussion (Hollander, 2004) and accommodating women's safety by providing transport when needed. Moreover, we incorporated social mapping to diversify knowledge in place making

(Rambaldi et al., 2006; Tobias, 2000) and to better understand socio-spatial dynamics, exclusions and engage in ongoing reflexive discussions with the participants (Laituri et al., 2023). The activity provided insight into many intersectional dimensions of marginalisation within the communities, including gender, marital status, poverty and unemployment; life of the factory workers, taboo income activities such as sex work or illicit alcohol production; settlements of internally displaced persons; new residential sites of people relocated by government programmes due to war or other reasons; and others.

Consideration of literacy across different social groups is critical in low-income and marginalised populations. Before piloting, our approach assumed that we would be able to recruit participants who could fill out the take-home survey forms with minimal assistance. However, literacy was lower than we expected, particularly among women in our rural study sites in Ethiopia and Kenya due to intertwinement of patriarchy and poverty. Even among literate participants, humility was professed alongside low confidence. Similarly, other case studies (Korzenevica, 2016) found that educated women often hesitated to participate because they feared not being knowledgeable enough in comparison to men.

Thus, we initiated the decentring of individuals (Smith, 2012) and the incorporation of collective and intergenerational knowledge (Boulton & Brannelly, 2015) in the data creation process. We suggested that participants tap into the skills of other people, crucially, of the same gender: their more literate children, their daughters-in-law, community elders, the group leaders, or the researchers ourselves to assist them in filling out the forms. This approach helped to build confidence for women, who struggled at times with expressing themselves. We also encouraged people to express their knowledge through a diversity of formats (e.g., proverbs, sayings, storytelling etc.) that some embraced in different forms like songs. This led to broader and more nuanced community input in the survey questions and the subsequent FGDs.

Finally, the inclusion or exclusion of marginalised people in the discussions was a crucial element of data production, ethics and care. Padan et al. (2022) critically question whether representation of a vulnerable population can stimulate representation and social learning; or the opposite, trigger paternalistic attitudes, silencing, humiliation and underestimation of their troubles by the rest of the group. Following their conclusions, we similarly decided not to request FGD participation from people for whom we did not have the capacity to adequately support their meaningful participation in the discussions. Instead, we engaged with vulnerable people separately, repeating relevant INIT8 steps on an individual basis. This practice was moderated by our awareness of the compounded harm that people may experience from being researched without subsequently seeing substantial change (Mkandawire-Valhmu & Stevens, 2010). We avoided implying influence from the research that we could not ensure.

5 | MULTIPLE DIMENSIONS OF REFLEXIVITY

We approached reflexivity broadly as an ongoing practice of reflection on the process of study by us and participants. We reflected on our ability to articulate our moral values and act in accordance with them (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023) and on the study's multi-fold impact and its topics. We considered four forms of reflexivity: (1) the positionality of researchers, (2) collaborative reflexivity in analysis and process, (3) reflexivity of participants, and (4) reflexivity on the overall study by us and respondents recognising its positioning within entrenched colonial epistemologies.

Reflexivity is commonly discussed in feminist studies as the awareness of the impact of the researcher's positionality, limitations, biases and assumptions (Rose, 1997; Sultana, 2007). As a group, we have shared various degrees of insider/outsider positions (Gupta, 2010), being aware that 'local' researchers do not share the same experiences as respondents. However, it was only through collaborative reflexivity (inspired by Bieler et al., 2021) that we have been able to fully embrace and critically question our positionalities at different situations and stages. This has required vulnerability in exposing assumptions and difficult situations in the field, and voicing (dis)agreements during method formulation and analysis. We aimed for joint learning and undertook a collaborative qualitative coding process, continuously discussing meanings and assumptions about the findings. We had weekly discussions online and several in-person meetings, during which we were continuously modifying our epistemology. We have intentionally distributed reflexivity (Bieler et al., 2021) by creating time, care and space for ethical reflections, constraints and moral dilemmas (see also Caretta & Faria, 2020). Although sometimes we felt that we failed, being caught unprepared in difficult situations (e.g., while facing accounts of domestic violence), we tried to perceive subjectivities, moral dilemmas and contradictions in the field as opportunities for discussions (Datta, 2018; Finlay, 2002), windows for exploration and deeper understanding.

Reflexivity of participants on the process and topics has received little academic attention (Cassell et al., 2020), though we aimed to create the enabling environment for it to flourish. Trust was a critical component (Nardon et al., 2021) that we cultivated through 'status' that we owned through belonging to universities (Buchanan, 2000), and merit trust that

we earned by giving time, commitment and genuine engagement in informal conversations, lengthy individual and collective interactions during the social mapping, and joint walks. The multiple stages of the process allowed participants to reflect on our questions before the group discussion, have provided reflexive space (Cassarino, 2004) to think about how their answers represented the situation in their community, to discuss with other community members (see also: Cassell et al., 2020; Nardon et al., 2021), structure their thoughts, develop confidence, and ultimately to be more intentional in presenting relevant and contextualised information on behalf of their community (see also: Roque et al., 2023).

The take-home survey forms fostered reflective practices and helped participants to express themselves in ways that they found appropriate. Responses on the survey forms themselves were typically short and vague, but the benefit of the activity for encouraging participant reflection, confidence and participation was clearly observed in the group discussions and directly remarked upon by participants (see also: Lee and Lee 2009). Participants expressed that they felt more heard: 'We are glad that you gave us the forms, it is like you were reflecting directly on us and our problems'. Some contrasted this experience with other research studies that made frustratingly narrow assumptions about their concerns and in which they felt their input was limited, ignored or less appreciated.

Although we aimed to make the process more ethical and meaningful for participants, we nevertheless were aware that this research does not fully respond to their priorities (Keikelame & Swartz, 2019). Participants wished to see solution-oriented projects that bring tangible, near-term improvements in infrastructure or services. Participants challenged us to reflect on the extent to which our research could improve water sector policy and practice, raising questions that were beyond our ability to answer satisfactorily. While participants appreciated our transparency about the nature and limitations of our project, we frequently felt that it was not enough.

6 | CONCLUSIONS

While resistance to extractive research grows (as in Datta, 2018; Liboiron, 2021), a slow speed of social change maintains 'methodological stasis' (Ndhlovu, 2021). Although we were unable to fully implement an alternative epistemology, we executed a multi-step context-building FGD method inspired by CBPO (Roque et al., 2023) and reflected on our learning for 'methodology *as* practice' (Hui, 2023): scrutinising collaboration among researchers and with the participants, and linking elements of feminist, decolonial and slow scholarship approaches. We analysed framing and continuous re-work of three aspects. We approached the power of the elite both in our North–South collaboration and in collaboration with group leaders in the study sites through evaluation of the impact at different stages and understanding how the unequal benefit balance can be minimised. Socio-spatial decisions directly impact research processes, inclusion and outcomes. We discussed these decisions in managing the ongoing inclusion of our Ethiopian co-authors despite the increasing violence in the region, as well as in defining peri-urban areas and embracing collective data generation to include illiterate or less confident women in rural areas. Finally, we have highlighted the necessity of approaching reflexivity through multiple angles: (1) the positionality of researchers, (2) collaborative reflexivity in analysis and process, (3) reflexivity of participants, and (4) reflexivity on the overall study positioned within entrenched colonial epistemology.

Although we embrace methodological evolution as a path towards decolonising research practice and acknowledge the compromises in this process, as exemplified by our work with the INIT8 method, we reiterate that change in academic structures and wider social systems is essential. This requires transformation beyond improved research methods. We see it happening *slowly* elsewhere in academia, for example, in transformation of funding structures, with welcome opportunities for grants that require a PI to be based in institutions in the Global South (Wellcome Trust) or growing recognition and valuing of alternative and more accessible knowledge outputs (for example, in submissions to the UK Research Excellence Framework assessment).

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Authors elect to not share data. Methodology data available in the forthcoming method report.

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