Whose Research Is It? Notable Ways Political Scientists Impact the Communities We Study

Whose Research Is It? Political Scientists Discuss Whether, How, and Why We Should Involve the Communities We Study

Kristin Michelitch, *Vanderbilt University*

As researchers with a focus on the domestic politics of countries in the Global South, we "collect" the insights, opinions, and behaviors of those we study for scholarly publication and teaching outputs. Our audiences, however, are often limited to other scholars or students at universities in the Global North rather than the communities we study. Linda Tuhiwai Smith shines a critical light on researchers who extract knowledge from the Global South and subsequently enshrine it in the Global North without delivering it in digestible format to those from whom the knowledge was extracted (Smith 2012, 10). In particular, she asks: *"Whose research is it? Who owns it? Whose interests does it serve? Who will benefit from it? Who has designed its questions and framed its scope? Who will carry it out? Who will write it up? How will its results be disseminated?"*

This symposium consists of comparative politics scholars who respond to this sentiment by discussing whether, how, and why they involve or impact the communities they study in the Global South through their research. Furthermore, they discuss how professional incentives in academia largely lack to engage these communities—but not always. This symposium aims, not to settle all debates, but rather to bring important perspectives for both political scientists and PhD students to contemplate for our discipline in moving forward.

The role that political scientists might play in communities we study, of course, has been an ongoing, multifaceted controversy. First, a historical debate centers on the extent to which political scientists should remain in squarely academic territory or involve themselves with politics and policy in the communities that we study.[1] The former camp holds that political science scholarship should focus on addressing knowledge gaps in academia and revising received wisdom through a dialogue with the extant literature. The latter camp holds that political scientists should engage the "real world" by, for example, deriving research questions from ongoing policy problems, designing and evaluating policy programming, and providing actionable policy recommendations. Using the example of policy makers in Southeast Asia, who are attentive to the academic (and non-academic) writings of those who study them in the Global North, Pepinsky questions whether our research *can* remain divorced from communities that we study. Approaching this question from the perspective of policy makers, Abbarno and Bonoff ask who in society should be involved in shaping politics and policy if not trained political scientists.

However, the larger debate exists in the space in which researchers question *to what extent* we should actively engage the communities we study over the course of a research project, from the design of research questions to the dissemination of results.[2] As many symposium contributors point out, political scientists mostly face professional demands to stay firmly in academic territory, conducting research that will reach the broadest possible academic audiences and leveraging rigorous scientific methodologies that might demand that the researched communities remain uninformed about the task at hand. Yet, there are both career-instrumental and moral reasons why political scientists should engage the communities that we study throughout the project duration.

Thachil and Vaishnav; Bracic; and Bleck, Dendere, and Sangaré discuss career-instrumental incentives to involving local communities in research. Namely, such engagement can improve the quality of research. They argue for more collaboration in designing research with local communities, which improves the construct and ecological validity of studies as well as the interpretation of results. Bracic underscores how community discussions regarding the interpretation of results may influence inferences and conclusions that might be drawn from findings. Writing about the large degree of mediation necessary to conduct research in the South Asian context, Thachil and Vaishnav also point out that engaging local community members improves networks, access to important actors and data sources, and establishes local credibility that may aid future research endeavors.

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However, many contributors believe that there is a strong moral imperative to involve the communities that they study in their research despite the lack of professional incentives. Namely, not doing so often risks treating communities involved in the research as mere objects of study for the fancies of Northern inquiries, perhaps even claiming to put forth "new knowledge" already known by the community under question. For Bracic, who studies small, marginalized Roma communities in Eastern Europe, this reason is sufficient to justify the involvement of local communities in research. Thachil and Vaishnav join in underscoring that the research question and other aspects of the design should face local scrutiny for local thematic relevance. They further point out that researchers demand substantial time and effort from local actors to undertake the research, often under the explicit or implicit assumption by these local actors that the research will benefit the community. Thus, researchers have the moral obligation to reciprocate by taking time and effort to inform the local actors of their research results.

Another option, which may be especially attractive to Global North scholars who do not originate in the country/ies they study, is the method advocated by Bleck, Dendere, and Sangaré to engage in North–South coauthor collaborations. These authors argue that North–South coauthor collaborations have been an excellent way to "decolonize" the production of knowledge in sub-Saharan Africa, especially with regard to research conducted in active conflict or post-conflict zones. Such collaborations increase the agency of local actors to influence all areas of the research design.

Bracic, however, cautions that there can be an important tension between professional incentives to follow rigorous research methodology and involvement of the local community. Namely, suppose a community is involved in research-design aspects such as developing the research question, adding insights to theory, and helping to develop key measurement strategies or interventions. This involvement can affect empirical results in that community members may subsequently have the incentive to behave in certain ways to obtain certain desired outcomes. To avoid such "contamination," researchers may be able to gain these insights through research with similar but different communities (e.g., Bleck and Michelitch 2017). However, in some cases such strategies add financial and time costs to the research, and it may nonetheless end up being difficult to extrapolate across seemingly similar communities. Researchers may have to consider carefully at what point in the research the participating community is involved.

A second major discussion, mostly among those political scientists committed to involving themselves with politics and policy in the communities that they study, centers on how we might improve beneficence of our research to such communities.[3] The authors in this symposium offer various ways to do so. First, Abbarno and Bonoff—drawing from their expertise as political science PhDs working at Democracy International and the USAID Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG) Learning Unit—discuss the value of collaboration between academics and policy makers to evaluate policy programming for joint learning.[4] However, as they emphasize, academics must meet policy makers "halfway" in these collaborations. Whereas policy makers must adapt to a host of methodological rigors demanded by political scientists, political scientists also must adapt, for instance, by being flexible to changing policy circumstances, working within the confines of bureaucratic parameters, and cultivating productive relationships through diplomatic communication.

Second, multiple contributors highlight how we might better disseminate our findings to local communities. Thachil and Vaishnav emphasize how fruitful dissemination of research outputs can be to locally valued sources in South Asia (e.g., local journals, news sources, and academic conferences). Lupu and Zechmeister, in their capacity as associate director and director, respectively, of the AmericasBarometer (i.e., a set of Americas-wide public-opinion surveys), describe how the active dissemination of survey results to policy makers in Latin American countries has resulted in increased attention given to citizen public opinion on policy priorities. Abbarno and Bonoff highlight how busy policy makers can access our findings through the creation and circulation of simple two-page policy memos via various outlets.

Third, multiple contributors—that is, Lupu and Zeichmeister and Bleck, Dendere, and Sangaré—emphasize how one's view of research beneficiaries can be expanded to include not only those who participate in the research as human subjects (e.g., survey respondents) but also many other individuals. Specifically, both sets of authors discuss the capacity building of local research assistants and enumerators in research methodology, which can lead to an increase in their skill sets and future employment opportunities.

Yet, research may not always be beneficial. One open question is, of course, what constitutes "positive" involvement and outcomes. Even if research is conducted "on behalf" of a community's interest or with good intentions by a researcher, it risks having negative impacts and unintended consequences. Often, policy-relevant research is called "unethical" only when it results in a so-called undesirable outcome, whereby what constitutes an undesirable outcome is typically defined by Global North ideals. Furthermore, Pepinsky concludes that despite good intensions, researchers in the Global North are insulated from these consequences. He questions whether there are "limits to which comparativists' research should affect the countries they study." Bleck, Dendere, and Sangaré similarly emphasize how researchers from the Global South

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ultimately bear disproportionate risks in North–South collaborations, especially in active conflict or post-conflict zones.

Finally, the objective of this symposium in our discipline's journal is to engender even more discussion regarding whether, how, and why political scientists should involve or impact the communities that we study and whether such engagement should be professionally incentivized to a greater degree. There is far from a disciplinary consensus concerning these questions, and inclusive discussions are necessary in considering standards of practice. Moving forward, however, we should consider whether engaging communities that we study should be purely a "public good"—as Abbarno and Bonoff call it in its current state—or whether we can incentivize such engagement, for example, through tenure and promotion review; "best practices" cultivated among graduate students and colleagues; or in generating section awards, as Thachil and Vaishnav argue. ■

NOTES

1. In practice, any human-subjects research—from field experiments to ethnographic work—involves impacting subjects. It is not limited to a range of potential costs and benefits outlined in a project's institutional review board documentation but also through raising the salience of certain topics, experiences, and perspectives elicited through the research or researcher presence. This symposium addresses issues of research involvement of a community above and beyond these influences.
2. In practice, scholars are increasingly attempting to achieve both academic and policy relevance with their research, but, due to the large time investment of having a foot in both worlds, it is difficult to meet academic standards of promotion and tenure through research that attempts to cover both well.
3. Of course, sometimes scholars must define how their work benefits humanity to receive grant funding (e.g., the National Science Foundation). However, Lupu and Zechmeister note how many researchers often overestimate the degree to which the conclusions of their academic work will be "helpful—*somehow*—to society at large" without concretely following through on a range of potentially quite expansive benefits.
4. The recent rise of the Evidence in Governance and Politics (EGAP), The Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL), and Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) networks has been important in actively encouraging academic and policy-maker collaborations, specifically concerning academic evaluation of policy programming using randomized controlled trials.

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SYMPOSIUM CONTRIBUTORS

Aaron J. Abbarno *is the Senior Evaluation Specialist at Democracy International and former Democracy Fellow in Comparative Politics and Democratization at USAID. He has advocated for evidence-based policy at the Brookings Institution, Office of Management and Budget, USAID, and the US Department of State, and applies political science research and methodology in development programs across the globe, most recently in Bangladesh, Barbados, Colombia, Georgia, Guyana, Kenya, Nepal, Peru and Tunisia. He may be reached at aabbarno@democracyinternational.com.*

Jaimie Bleck *is a Ford Family Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Notre Dame. She specializes in African politics with a focus on democratization, education, participation, and citizenship. Her book,* Education and Empowered Citizenship in Mali, *was published by Johns Hopkins University Press in 2015. Her work appears in the* Journal of Politics, the Journal of Modern African Studies, Comparative Political Studies, African Affairs *and* Democratization. *She may be reached at jbleck@nd.edu.*

Ana Bracic *is assistant professor in the political science department at the University of Oklahoma and a cofounder of the Community Engagement + Experiments Lab. Her research focuses on questions of discrimination, the persistence of social exclusion, and ground-level effectiveness of human rights institutions such as NGOs. She may be reached at bracic@ou.edu.*

Nicole Bonoff *is a post-doctoral research fellow at the La Follette School of Public Affairs at the University of Wisconsin – Madison and former Democracy Fellow in Impact Evaluation at USAID. Her main research interests include strategies for electoral clientelism and public finance in Sub-Saharan Africa. She is currently working on a project related to increasing the tax basis and the completion rate of public infrastructure projects in Ghana. She can be reached at bonoff@wisc.edu.*

Chipo Dendere *is a post-doctoral fellow and visiting assistant professor of political science at Amherst College where she teaches African politics. Dr. Dendere's main research is on comparative democratization and the role of migration on sending country politics. Her new research is on the role social media is playing in shaping politics in new democracies and authoritarian regimes. She may be reached at cdendere@amherst.edu.*

Noam Lupu *is associate professor of political science at Vanderbilt University and associate director of the Latin American Public Opinion Project. He is the author of* Party Brands in Crisis *(Cambridge University Press, 2016) and coeditor of* Campaigns and Voters in Developing Democracies *(University of Michigan Press, in press). His research interests include comparative political behavior, political parties and partisanship, democratic representation, legacies of political violence, and class and inequality. He can be reached at noam.lupu@vanderbilt.edu.*

Kristin Michelitch *is assistant professor of political science at Vanderbilt University where she studies the effect of dynamic political events (e.g., electoral cycle, coup) and changes in the political information environment (e.g., traditional media, new communication technologies) on citizens' and politicians' behavior, attitudes, and identity. Michelitch's work often involves partnering with African or international organizations and donors in field experiments aimed at testing theoretically-driven hypotheses and learning which policy programs are most effective. She may be reached at kristin.michelitch@vanderbilt.edu.*

Thomas Pepinsky *is associate professor of government at Cornell University. A specialist in comparative politics and international political economy, his current research focuses on identity and political economy, in Southeast Asia and beyond. He may be reached at pepinsky@cornell.edu.*

Boukary Sangaré *is a PhD student at Leiden University. Boukary is one of the most renowned anthropologists on Central Mali, especially on the Fulani and their plight during the conflict in 2012 and thereafter. Boukary has been part of several consultation missions to Northern Mali and has published various reports on the region. He is involved in the research programmes of Mirjam de Bruijn, Mobile Africa Revisited and Connecting in Times of Duress. Boukary is currently teaching at the Faculty of Human Sciences and Education (University of Bamako). He may be reached at boukarysangare@gmail.com.*

Tariq Thachil *is associate professor of political science at Vanderbilt University. His current research focused on the political consequences of urbanization and internal migration in India. He can be reached at tariq.thachil@vanderbilt.edu.*

Milan Vaishnav *is a senior fellow and director of the South Asia Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington, DC. His primary research focus is the political economy of India, and he examines issues such as corruption and governance, state capacity, political finance, and electoral behavior. He may be reached at mvaishnav@ceip.org.*

Elizabeth J. Zechmeister *is Cornelius Vanderbilt Professor of Political Science and director of the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) at Vanderbilt University. Her research interests center on elections, representation, and crisis. She may be reached at liz.zechmeister@vanderbilt.edu.*

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