

Reflections on Fieldworks Among Vulnerable Populations by Myanmar Exile Scholars During Coup and Revolution in Myanmar

Tin Maung Htwe

Abstract

The 2021 Myanmar coup significantly altered the landscape for Myanmar researchers to conduct fieldwork in politically unstable environments. This paper reflects on my and other exile Myanmar scholar experience to navigate the intersecting challenges of positionality, power dynamics and vulnerability amidst the ongoing revolution.

This paper applies Foucault's theories on power and knowledge to examine the power imbalances manifest in fieldwork between exile researchers and vulnerable populations. It also explores the role of international academic institutions in shaping research agendas and influence knowledge production in Myanmar's volatile political context. Using autoethnography as a framework, the paper also reflects on the researchers' personal experiences, emotions and struggles as the exile scholars to broader social and political issues through analyzing the ethical and positional challenges in conducting research under authoritarian regimes and revolution counterfeits.

This paper examines the role of positionality in shaping researcher interactions with participants as both an insider (a Myanmar national) and outsider (a researcher affiliated with international academic institutions) influenced trust-building and data collection. The paper also delves into the power dynamics between researcher and participants, especially vulnerable populations such as internally displaced persons (IDPs), and how these imbalances affected the research process. Additionally, this paper explores the emotional toll of fieldwork during political turmoil, where the line between researcher and activist often blurs. By reflecting on these experiences, this paper contributes to the discussion on the unique challenges Global South researchers face, particularly when operating in their own countries during times of crisis. I

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