

Closing the door on parachutes and parasites



For *The Lancet Global Health's* International Advisory Board see <https://www.thelancet.com/langlo/international-advisory-board>

No one likes a parachute researcher: the one who drops into a country, makes use of the local infrastructure, personnel, and patients, and then goes home and writes an academic paper for a prestigious journal. At *The Lancet Global Health*, we look extremely unfavourably on papers submitted by authors who have done primary research in another country (particularly a low-income or middle-income country) but not included any author from that nation. For research involving patient recruitment, treatment in existing facilities, and follow-up, the notion that no locally based individuals made a “substantial contribution” (per authorship criteria) to the acquisition of data is pure fiction. Perhaps, as events played out, none of those individuals additionally fulfilled the criteria of a substantial contribution to the design of the study or writing of the report, but then perhaps they were not given the opportunity. Perhaps if they had, the design would have been more appropriate to the setting and the contextual interpretation more realistic.

Most would agree that “parasitic” research of this nature has no future in global health. But what about secondary data analysis? *The Lancet Global Health* also receives a good volume of submissions that use publicly available data collected locally in another country, perhaps by means of a Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) or Health and Demographic Surveillance System (HDSS). The author may never even visit the country. Should he or she be similarly obliged to include locally based researchers on the author line even though he or she did not appropriate any local resources or knowledge in the collection of the data?

We polled our International Advisory Board on this question and the results were interesting. They ranged from “Of course!”, to “Not really”, to “It’s difficult...” In the “Of course!” corner, one member wrote: “I do not draw a distinction between primary or secondary data analysis for authorship rules. Someone [locally] did all the hard work to collect the data, knows its practical challenges and understands its context. How can someone sitting somewhere distant be so presumptuous as to reanalyse and reinterpret these data without having any clue about the quality of the data collection on the ground and the context within which to interpret the numbers?”

Meanwhile in the “Not really” camp, another member noted: “If these [papers] are based on open-access

datasets then I don’t think you can [ban] those which do not involve authors from the source country. This is the entire basis of open-access data. The question of context and interpretation is one which the reviewers could be explicitly asked to address.” A further member suggested that: “Sometimes the [high-income-country] researchers bring research skills that are hard to come by in-country. Sometimes countries have collected data that are not analysed. In these instances, having someone from outside analyse it can be a real contribution. If the research could make a difference to health and wellbeing, it would be a lost opportunity not to consider publishing it.”

But there is an ethical dimension too, said another: “Although the DHS and HDSS data are freely available, it doesn’t look good for our colleagues in the North to author papers without involving partners in the specific countries they are writing about.” Another went further: “Such partnering is a service to developing connections and scholarship opportunities for Southern colleagues.”

The solution is to make collaboration a condition of data use, suggested a board member from a middle-income country. “For example, researchers from the North who want to use our data are required to include our local researchers who produced the data. Before sharing our datasets, we demand that they visit [our setting] to get a feel for the environment and population about which they will be writing.” Yet we need to be careful not to enter the realm of tokenism or “gift” authorship, warned one respondent. “Even myself, based in [a middle-income country], find situations where I could not point to a colleague/name to join a paper.”

We would like to thank our International Advisory Board for their frank and insightful input. The issue is clearly not straightforward, especially in this era of open data, and that an outright “ban” on submissions without author representation from the country of study may have unintended consequences. However, we strongly encourage those embarking on secondary analyses to recruit, and involve at all stages of the research and publication process, suitably qualified local researchers. We invite readers who have successfully negotiated this process to share their experiences and to help us develop future policies and expectations. ■ *The Lancet Global Health*

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