

Working with Research Assistants/ Translators in Overseas

Fieldwork – RiDNet Seminar

Researchers in Development PhD Network (RiDNet), Centre for Global Development,
University of Leeds

Website: <http://www.polis.leeds.ac.uk/centre-global-development/about-centre/researchers-development-network/>

E-mail: cgd@leeds.ac.uk

23 February 2012

Presenters:

Dr Polly Wilding, School of Politics and International Studies

Dr Julia Leventon, School of Earth & Environment

Nicola Favretto, School of Earth & Environment

Jennifer Dyer, School of Earth & Environment

What are research assistants used for?

- Fieldwork
 - Understanding context/ culture
 - Practical help
- Finding documents and people
- To conduct interviews/ focus groups
- Workshop facilitation
 - Note taking
 - Language facilitation
 - Organization
- To build rapport with respondents
- Translation/ interpretation
- Transcribing interviews
- Can make research process safer

What are translators used for?

- Translation/ interpretation
- To build rapport with respondents
- Can make research process safer

***Whether you are employing a research assistant or translator is an important distinction – will have implications for the skills required to carry out the role and therefore pay**

Suggestions on finding a research assistant/ translator

- Get in touch with NGOs before travelling to the country
- Contact someone in the local university – ask the head of a department to introduce you to students who may be able to act as potential research assistants/ translators (top students, people who have excellent language skills, people who are familiar with the geographical area/ target population and/or issues)
- Important to meet potential research assistants/ translators to ensure that you get along, etc.
- Be careful about miscommunications when contacting potential research assistants/ translators over e-mail – make sure that you have a similar understanding of hours and wages, etc.

What to look for in a research assistant/ translator

- Experience
- Excellent language skills
- Friendly
- Resourcefulness
- Flexibility
- Trustworthiness
- Facilitation skills (especially for focus groups)

Data collection formats when using a research assistant/ translator

- Semi-structured interviews
 - Researcher asks question in English, assistant translates it in their own language, respondent responds, assistant translates response in English
 - Assistant asks questions directly off of a form to respondent
- Assistant conducts questionnaire
- Focus group discussions – assistant will help to facilitate discuss, focus the group
- Conversations – assistant translates conversations and you take notes
- Walking around – assistant translates as you walk around a community, etc.
- **Remember** – the role of a research assistant changes depending on the activity

Things to consider when working with a research assistant/ translator

- Due to difficulties that may arise, it is alright to take on a research assistant/ translator on a trial basis, allowing you to renegotiate their position if there are problems – suggest a 4 week appraisal for both of you to raise issues (and see if it is working for you both)

- Prior to conducting research agree on how much time the research assistant/ translator is expected to work, the amount that they will be paid, and what exactly will they be paid for
 - If you are travelling with your research assistant/ translator, will they be paid for travel time, for the times you are not conducting interviews, etc.
 - Depending on the work that is involved, it might be beneficial to think of an hourly or daily rate.
 - Will you be paying for travel expenses? Accommodation? Meals?
 - The general advice is not to pay more than what the local fees for a research assistant/ translator would be

- Prior to conducting research, ensure your research assistant/ translator understands the topic/ research questions (if they are acting as translator)
 - Explain point of research
 - Go over interview schedule in detail prior to conducting interviews, question by question
 - Clarify words/ understanding of concepts, especially regarding sensitive areas/ topics
 - Ensure that assistant knows how to translate each question and knows why you're asking them (sometimes the reason why a question is not getting a good answer is because it is not being interpreted well)
 - The better a research assistant/ translator understands your topic/ the questions, the better they can explain/ extrapolate respondents' answers
 - Research assistants/ translators can be used to help explain words/ concepts to respondent
 - Explain the importance of translating verbatim, not to summarize or add to what the respondent said

- Be upfront about what you're asking your research assistant/ translator to do (travel to rural communities, walk through fields, sleep in a tent, share a bedroom, etc.?)

- Ethical Issues
 - Ensure that research assistant/ translator understand the ethics of conducting research (e.g. the importance of maintaining confidentiality)

- Your relationship with your research assistant/ translator is important
 - Important to work with someone you trust
 - During data collection you will share the difficulties faced
 - They can be a friend/ offer valuable support
 - They will often have to deal with difficult situations as they arise
 - Your relationship can affect rapport with respondents, the interpretation of data, etc.

- When difficulties arise, discuss problems as soon as possible in private
 - Need to be clear and firm

- During research process, make time for regular debriefs with your research assistant/ translator
 - How are they finding the process?
 - Are they facing any difficulties?
 - Is there anything that they don't understand/ require further explanation on?
- Do you require a contract?
 - Can ensure the research assistant/ translator maintains confidentiality
 - Agree on hours, wage (hourly, daily), what you will be paying for (travel expenses, accommodation, meals etc.)
 - Will there be issues around tax and social security?
 - Legality of employing a research assistant/ translator within country – can take on as freelance

Potential difficulties when working with research assistants/ translators

- Researcher's own lack of experience with research methods or with working with research assistants/ translators can affect relationship
- Keeping control of the conversation when using research assistant as translator or using a translator – translators can have a long conversation with respondent after you ask a question
- Gap between question and discussion (short question, long response, short translation) – ask your research assistant/ translator to translate verbatim if possible, and to politely stop the respondent to translate what has been said if they are talking for a long time, allowing the respondent to continue after translation
- Research assistant's/ translator's lack of experience, unprofessional behaviour (e.g. answering phone during an interview)
- Research assistant/ translator comes unprepared (e.g. wearing inappropriate footwear for walking around a field, not dressed appropriately)
- Research assistant/ translator affects rapport with respondents (due to their attitude, identity, etc.)
- Research assistant/ translator questions the questions you are asking in front of respondents – important that this does not happen
- Research assistant/ translator builds rapport with the respondents instead of you

Importance of gender

- You need to think about whether the gender of your research assistant/ translator is important – context is important
- The gender of your research assistant/ translator can impact the data - think about your topic and whether it would be more appropriate to have a male or female research assistant/ translator, or both – are your questions gender sensitive?
- Will you be sharing accommodation?
- As a female researcher, will a male research assistant/ translator assist you getting around the country?

Funding for research assistants/ translators

- The use of a research assistant/ translator is a legitimate research cost
- Check with your department to see if they provide funding for research costs
- Look for grants that organizations or societies might offer to support research/ fieldwork costs

Other things to consider

- Using research assistants/ translators can delay the research process (e.g. it can take time to locate a research assistant/ translator)
- Ownership over the research – *It is advised* that you maintain sole ownership of the data, not allow research assistant to become joint researcher – this, however, will depend on the type of research you are conducting (i.e. action research may share ownership of data)
- Just as researcher identity can affect data, so too can a research assistant's/ translator's identity – think about how this might affect your data collection
- Will you give space for the research assistant/ translator to add their own opinions during the interview?
- You need to remain the focus of the research – ensure the research assistant/ translator does not build rapport with the respondents instead of you, but helps you to build rapport
- If you are travelling with your research assistant/ translator, or the research requires you to spend a lot of time together, make time to do things separately
- Would you like your research assistant to maintain a reflexive diary?
- Do you need to provide training?