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Introduction

The Black Lives Matter movement, the murder of George Floyd by the police officer Derek Chauvin in Minneapolis, USA, the COVID pandemic, the re-election of Trump and the over-arching geopolitical and planetary crises, all represent a significant rupture moment that refocuses critical attention on the uneven relationships and power dynamics that lie at the heart of all "development" encounters (Newman et al. 2025; Noxolo, 2017). These dynamics encompass the imperfect nature of research collaboration, participation and partnerships, as well as the thorny epistemic contests over ideas, research ethics and the controversies over voice and representation. More and more research funders and universities are setting out directives for what constitutes "responsible" research and integrity (see the "Hong Kong principles" – Moher et al., 2020; Universities UK 2019 "Concordat to Support Research Integrity" initiative – UKCORI, 2019; the Trust Code of Conduct for Equitable Research Partnerships 2018 – TRUST, 2018). The focus on institutional responsibility is further *compounded* by the compression of time available for research and reflection, *accelerated* by the rise of artificial intelligence (AI), and *heightened* by concerns about the locus of intelligence and our capacity as humans to make sound moral judgements in a polarising world.

This Special Issue comprises a selection of papers first presented as contributions to two panels co-convened by Ainslie and Talleh Nkobou at consecutive Development Studies Association (DSA) UK conferences in June 2023 and June 2024.[1] During our panel discussions, participants engaged in reflective dialogues around theoretical/methodological considerations, case studies, and personal/auto-ethnographic reflections on this thematic area of scholarship. Whilst concepts like "*co-production*" and "*integrity*" have gained rhetorical prominence, we think more critical attention is required to examine the inherently extractive and power-laden nature of research and development encounters. So, the Special Issue asks, as researchers, who exactly are we "responsible" to? When does the research project and "our" responsibility begin and end? What constitutes more deliberative ways of thinking about and sharing experiences underpinning the technologies and practices of being "responsible"?

Articles in the special issue

The articles cover diverse geographies and fields of research encounters in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), India, South Africa, Uganda, Jordan, Tanzania, Bangladesh, Guinea-Bissau, Canada

[1]The Jun 2023 DSA conference panel was entitled "*Responsible Research: Ethics and Integrity in the Anthropocene.*" This was Panel P25 at conference DSA 2023, held at the University of Reading. The conference theme was "Crisis in the Anthropocene: rethinking connection and agency for development." https://nomadit.co.uk/conference/dsa2023/p/13025 The Jun 2024 DSA conference panel was entitled "*(More) responsible research: ethics and integrity in a polarising world*". This was Panel P09 at the DSA 2024, held at SOAS, University of London. The conference theme was "Social Justice and development in a polarising world". https://nomadit.co.uk/conference/116#14961

and Kenya. Cross-cutting development and humanitarian practices provide insights into shared instances of procedural difficulties, ethical dilemmas and relational practices. Here, we set out the three core themes that thread the articles and viewpoints of this Special Issue. We start by exploring critical and decolonial reflections on the meanings of "responsibility" (see Abu Hamdan, 2025; Finca, 2025; Jebin, 2025; Mathur, 2025; Talleh Nkobou, 2025), highlighting the interplay between power, agency, and ethics as sites of contestation during research encounters. We then examine the methodological implications of reflexivity, and how willful (see Ahmed, 2014) forms of research practice deconstruct and challenge familiar framings of "responsibility" as studied neutrality, and push towards a more embedded, co-creative, and resistance-literate research culture (Abu Hamdan, 2025; Finca, 2025; Mathur, 2025; Pierre, 2024). Finally, several of the papers in the Special Issue focus on the positionality and material experiences of both the researchers and their interlocutors (Ng'endo & Kariuki, 2025; Nsokele & Kika, 2024; Jebin, 2025; Uddin, 2025). These experiences are conditioned by structural, historical, gendered and lived realities and thus require an explicit engagement with responsibility and reflexivity in the inter-subjective construction of worlds.

The authors reveal and attempt to resolve the inherent tensions within research encounters through reflexivity, reciprocity, and reckoning with power. Intersectional experiences of gender and sexuality, class and caste, and race and nationality highlight the need for approaches that move away from universal methodological templates to approaches that rely on situated judgments, negotiated relationships, and the willingness to align one's practice with the claims and knowledges of research interlocutors (Mathur, 2025; Talleh Nkobou, 2025). By foregrounding the contingency and difficulty of situated action in development and knowledge encounters, the authors challenge the illusion of an unproblematic terrain of institutional Research Ethics Clearance procedures and protocols in development research (Jebin, 2025). Papers in our Special Issue argue that as researchers, we must recognise the unstable terrain that we traverse and willfully accept the discomfort required to build fundamentally more reciprocal knowledge partnerships within development research (Abu Hamdan, 2025; Finca, 2025; Pierre, 2024).

Three cross-cutting themes in the special issue

The first theme of the Special Issue explores critical and decolonial reflections on the meanings of "responsibility". These reflections highlight the interplay between power, agency, and ethics as sites of contestation during research encounters. These sites of contestation, according to Pierre (2024), expose the need for responsible research practices, which identify leverage points to rebalance the uneven relationships and power dynamics that left unquestioned, would reinforce inequitable experiences (Finca 2025; Abu Hamdan 2025; Jebin 2025; Talleh Nkobou 2025). In this sense, a decolonial deconstruction of responsibility, according to Talleh Nkobou (2025), reveals the *interconnection* between responsibility and agency, which prescribes certain boundaries on the actions of the research participants (researcher *and* interlocutors).

Being "responsible", as Talleh Nkobou argues, therefore requires a willfullness – on the part of the researcher – which is to enter the world of the interlocutors, to engage in the relational unveiling of that world, align their actions with their interlocutors' struggles for greater freedom *à la* Amartya Sen (1999), and jointly diagnose the unwillingness to comply with the authority of the dominant. The "dominant" may, in fact, include institutionally endorsed proscriptions and boundaries that reinforce the subjugation of different ways of knowing and being in development practice and research. Therefore, responsibility goes beyond a naïve, apolitical pursuit of wellbeing, i.e. measuring livelihoods, food insecurity, climate vulnerability, and the prescriptions of dominant moral framings that may fail to recognise the agency and willfulness of research interlocutors. For example, the resistant farmer in rural south-eastern Tanzania may pursue other goals (such as reclaiming their expropriated land) which quite likely will not advance their wellbeing and may in fact decrease it, such as their refusal to work as wage labourers, in their pursuit of a more profound political

project. Mathur's paper on cash transfer programs in urban South India[2] adds another layer of responsibility on the part of the researcher to recognise and engage with the weight of dominant framings of "socially desirable actions". These actions can press participants to enact "responsible" behaviours (e.g. commitments to savings, investment, education) and to demonstrate socially constructed "positive" changes in their lives that are the institutionally required outcomes of the development intervention. Mathur argues further that participants may feel that any failure on their part to highlight these required cash transfer-induced behaviours might lead to a withdrawal of the benefits and to them being categorised as "irresponsible".

A different form of alignment is aptly described by Luz and Sousa (2025) in their work in Guinea-Bissau, where concealment from bureaucratised development oversight facilitates a way of coping with procedural uncertainties in processes of collaboration. Similarly, Nsokele and Kika (2024) problematise concealment as "research conducted under disguise" which they argue can offer unique access to otherwise inaccessible data and provide research safety in sensitive contexts. And yet, Nsokele and Kika point out that this poses significant methodological dilemmas regarding transparency, consent, and the legitimacy of using data gathered in such circumstances. Ultimately, this means responsible research must prioritise building and maintaining trust within research partnerships (Nsokele and Kika 2024) and with interlocutors through practical awareness and what Jebin refers to as "critical transparency" (Jebin 2025).

By means of such reflexive practices, authors in our Special Issue actively problematise their positionality in relation to research partners and interlocutors. Such reflexivity, Talleh Nkobou argues, exposes unexamined assumptions about *epistemic* criteria and how the dominant epistemic focus on material wellbeing may undermine resistances and community concerns about broader political goals. These reflexive practices alert researchers to the dangers of inserting their own values and judgements into the research encounter, and in the process, they become open to self-(re)construction. For example, the deficit characterisation of recipients in cash transfer schemes as "lazy, needy and dependent" within the dominant social constructs underscores the imperative for researchers to approach each encounter with sensitivity and reflexivity (Mathur 2025). This involves continual "interpretation of interpretations" (Abu Hamdan 2025), and being aware of how various social, political, theoretical, and linguistic aspects shape knowledge creation, material realities, and the construction, interpretation, and writing of development research (Jebin 2025).

In the same vein, Finca (2025) points to the importance of reflection, which in her case facilitated the emergence of rich insights rooted in people's lived realities and experiences of long-term environmental changes. These realities sit largely outside the dominant understandings and positivist interpretations of rangeland management in rural South Africa. At a practical level, she also notes how regular feedback sessions in the communities, combined with reflection and learning opportunities, promoted the *co-production* of solutions and supported relationship and trust building. For Abu Hamdan (2025), reflecting on her research journey in the Jordanian arid steppe with semi-nomadic Bedouin communities, reflexivity goes beyond positionality statements and declarations as "box-ticking exercises", and becomes an integral part of knowledge co-creation and building relational bonds with research interlocutors. As such, reflexivity means being accountable for how our own positions and identities shape the knowledge we create and the ways we perceive and understand the world.

In fact, several of the papers in the Special Issue focus on the social identities, languages and material experiences of both the researchers and their interlocutors. As noted above, these experiences are conditioned by structural, historical, gendered and other lived realities and thus require an explicit engagement with responsibility and reflexivity in the inter-subjective construction of worlds. For instance, the participants in the cash transfer programmes that Mathur (2025) describes, often start from more vulnerable and socially disadvantaged positions in terms of class,

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[2]We are delighted that Vibhor Mathur's article won *Development in Practice*'s "Practitioner and Early Career Researcher Prize" for 2025.

caste, and race than more educated or socially privileged researchers (Smith 2021). For Abu Hamdan (2025), for Jebin (2025), and for Nsokele and Kika (2024), the binaries of insider/outsider and native/local/foreign blur the tidiness of the hierarchical social categories within research encounters.

Uddin's (2025) work, conducting research among gender-fluid Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, highlights that by defying traditional gender norms, some refugees are exposed to transphobic prejudices and face harsh conditions within the socio-religious intersections of the refugee camps. These simultaneously intersecting and multiple experiences make Rohingya transgender refugees more vulnerable within already hostile political and cultural contexts. To understand their vulnerabilities, researchers must use cultural and trauma sensitive methodologies (Uddin 2025; Mathur 2025). Moreover, while an intersectional approach offers valuable insights, understanding the host country's (i.e. Bangladesh) context and an on-going reflection on the research purpose and consequences are essential. This paper emphasises that the situated understanding of transgender is influenced by sociocultural factors, which shape both cultural and material experiences.

Forced to conduct her study remotely during COVID, Jebin's research into the experiences of gender-based violence among Bangladeshi women whilst employed in Saudi Arabia uses a decolonial feminist lens to stress the importance of challenging extractive practices. Jebin adopted an innovative "dual consent" approach to securing voluntary, prior and informed consent, whilst noting that consent is an ongoing process. She also advocates for the centring of local epistemologies and the co-production of knowledge through context-sensitive, trauma-informed methodologies, and empathetic engagement (Jebin 2025).

While Khatri and Khadka's (2025) critical review of the capacity development outcomes of development volunteerism seen from a Global South perspective gestures in part to issues that lie outside this Special Issue, their research findings do point to the potential that development volunteerism has - when it explicitly both values local knowledge and prioritises mutual learning - to making a positive contribution to global development. In common with our main themes, they note that to be effective, Global North-South volunteerism in particular requires a critical re-evaluation of current practices and a deeper focus on relational dynamics so that it rests more effectively on the pillars of solidarity, mutual respect, and equality.

For Ng'endo and Kariuki (2025), the traumatic historical experiences of the indigenous hunter-gatherer Ogiek community, who reside primarily in the Indigenous Mau forest complex of Kenya, cannot be overlooked. Through storytelling methodologies, their paper argues for reflexive and relational approaches to research that is fully cognisant of the historical implications of the colonial period. These colonial outcomes continue to be sanctioned by neoliberal development approaches within the contemporary state. These market-based conceptions of development thinking and practice contribute to the marginalisation of local communities and exacerbate their vulnerabilities to climate change through evictions from the forest on grounds of conservation, the confiscation of their livestock, and the destruction of their beehives and honey barrels.

Conclusions

This Special Issue has sought to examine the inherently extractive and power-laden nature of research and development encounters. Contributors to the Special Issue have responded to our initial provocations, which we set out at two DSA conferences, regarding the need to foreground and problematise "responsibility" in development research. We are grateful for their considered engagement with these challenging ideas, whilst recognising that much more work remains to be done in this regard. The changing international and relational dynamics of research make it imperative that all researchers *and* research funding institutions remain focused on the complex, layered and political dimensions that are implicated in doing "responsible", i.e. accountable, equitable, and ultimately, transformative research.

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