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## ARTICLE

# Researcher effects in survey-based research: Insights from research in South Sudan

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**Summary**

**Motivation:** In policy-relevant and applied research in international development, the evidence-based turn has led to increasing donor demand for evidence that is neutral, objective, and value-free. Rather than this positivist understanding, the article argues for reflexivity and acknowledgement of positionality to help overcome potential researcher effects.

**Purpose:** Drawing on the example of survey research in South Sudan, the article argues that social relations between the researcher, surveyors, and participants shape the research process and hence knowledge creation. It examines why survey research conducted under similar circumstances led to distinctive data sets.

**Methods and approach:** The argument is based on comparing survey data gathered by two groups of locally hired surveyors in South Sudan and subsequent semi-structured interviews with them.

**Findings:** The data show that the researcher's positionality, broadly conceived, influenced data collection. The way the locally hired surveyors perceived the lead researcher and the economically challenging environment of South Sudan—a country severely embroiled in violent conflict—affected the data that were gathered with a social survey, and consequently affected knowledge production.

**Policy implications:** The article contributes to the literature that argues that researcher effects also occur in quantitative research. It shows that in policy-relevant research reflexivity is necessary to strengthen research results. Researchers working in conflict-affected, impoverished environments, and donors requesting evaluation and measurement, should be encouraged to take positionality into account and to ask questions about research practices.

**KEYWORDS**

evaluation, interview effects, positivism, quantitative research, reflexivity, social surveys, South Sudan

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

This article examines whether and to what extent knowledge produced for policy decisions in conflict-ridden and impoverished regions is influenced by research practices. Conducting research in such environments matters. Often, such research is concerned with issues related to violent conflict and the associated problems of poverty and human suffering. It is frequently policy-relevant and done to plan and evaluate projects that are conducted to end poverty, improve health care, or contribute to peacebuilding. Thus, such research is directly affecting people's lives. The question this article is concerned with, whether research results are influenced by research practices, does not arise because of the environment in which it takes place or the people and issues with which it is concerned. Research in conflict-affected and low-income countries often presents particular challenges, including logistical matters and issues with obtaining access to participants. Further, in recent years, the dangers of on-the-ground research in conflict-affected environments have increased, which has resulted in a move towards remote data-gathering (Perera, 2017a). These are serious challenges; still, the question of the accuracy of research results arises because of how policy-relevant research with regards to peacebuilding and international development is conducted, particularly because of its frequent grounding in positivism. Positivist methodological approaches understand data to be observable, scientific inquiry as being marked by objectivity, and the rigorous application of method as eliminating subjectivity. This understanding of reality as an independently existing entity from which facts can be gathered, together with policy-makers' wishes for objective and clearly organized and presented answers to the question of whether a policy works, potentially leads to flawed research results.

Scholars working in critical theory have shed light on the numerous ways in which social relations can play out in the research process and influence results (Behl, 2017; Gallagher, 2016; Mahé, 2019), and in critical and mostly qualitative research, reflexivity and awareness of researcher effects are thus close to standard practice (Alveson & Skoeldberg, 2009; Attia & Edge, 2017; Patnaik, 2013). Reflexivity, the constant "examining how one's positionality, perspective, backgrounds, and insights influence all aspects of the study" (Vagle, 2018, p. 14), has been named "a crucial strategy in the process of generating knowledge by means of qualitative research" (Berger, 2015, p. 219). Still, reflexivity and considerations of the researcher's positionality are, for the most part, absent from quantitative research, with some notable exceptions, for example Louise Ryan's and Anne Golden's thoughts on the value of reflexivity when conducting survey research (Ryan & Golden, 2006) and the work by Brady West and Annelies Blom on interviewer effects on survey data collection processes (West & Blom, 2016). Drawing on this, this article explores the questions of whether and how researcher positionality affects data gathering through a discussion of my own attempts to gather information on media development in South Sudan. The examination of survey research conducted in the country's capital, Juba, and subsequent semi-structured interviews with the locally hired surveyors, shed light on the under-researched area of the relationship between international researchers and locally hired surveyors in a conflict-affected, impoverished country, and these relationships' effects on research results. The article argues that much of the applied research conducted in international development and peacebuilding rests on a positivist worldview and that this prevents the acknowledgement of researcher effects, potentially resulting in flawed conclusions. A move away from positivism, on the other hand, would strengthen, not weaken, research results; a reflexive approach and awareness of researcher positionality are vital not only in qualitative but also in quantitative research. My aim is to show the importance of acknowledging context, including the environment, power, and social relations, regardless of whether the data is qualitative or quantitative, and the methods used are based on interviews, survey research or field experiment. I argue that the understanding of research as an independent or neutral data-gathering exercise is not valid; researcher effects are present both in qualitative and in quantitative research.

To explicate the argument that data are not gathered in an independently existing reality and that data (and thus, knowledge) are instead produced by the actors participating in the research and their relationships and dynamics, the article proceeds as follows. Following this introduction, Section 2 provides an overview of the principles underpinning research in international development, showing its grounding in positivism. This is followed

in Section 3 by a brief exploration of the social survey as a preferred method and the problems when conducting social surveys in conflict-affected and impoverished environments. In Section 4, the case study—data gathering in South Sudan—is introduced, followed in Section 5 by a description of the two surveys and subsequent interviews with the surveyors and an elaboration of the recruitment of the student-surveyors. Section 6 analyses the data and presents the insights from the questionnaires and interviews. In Section 7, I elaborate on the research environment as part of the research context, before offering some thoughts in Section 8 on how to manage researcher effects. The conclusion pulls the argument together. Based on the insight gained from comparing the questionnaires and analysing the interviews it argues that the researcher's positionality, how the researcher is perceived by the locally hired surveyors, and the research environment all affect research results. This is a significant insight into the practice of survey research that spotlights the idea that research grounded in positivism and its belief in and demand for value-free, neutral evidence is problematic. While drawing only on South Sudan, these insights have value beyond this case. South Sudan is severely affected by violent conflict and poverty, and this environment, together with how local surveyors perceived the researcher, affected the data and research results. Such a problematic environment, however, is not unique to South Sudan but is present in many countries in which international development and peacebuilding take place. The article shows that omitting the researcher and potential researcher effects from a study does not prevent such effects. Rather, reflexivity and awareness of positionality would be a better strategy to help manage researcher effects. Thus, the article argues for the need to consider positionality and reflexivity in policy-relevant research conducted in poverty-ridden and conflict-affected regions in order to better understand the issues under investigation.

## 2 | A GROUNDING IN POSITIVISM

The argument put forward here is that research in general and data collection more specifically are happening in social relations and are consequently shaped by them. This holds true not just for qualitative but also for quantitative research, and this insight is significant for research conducted in countries affected by violent conflict and poverty. In such environments, a researcher might be unaware of social, economic, and political circumstances that have the ability to affect data gathering; it is all the more essential to consider any influences and their potential impact on a study. A penchant for quantitative evidence and social surveys can be spotted in international development and policy-relevant research (Sushant et al., 2018), even if qualitative methods such as focus groups and interviews are mentioned in manuals and publications (Gudda, 2011; Nuguti, 2015; Wholey et al., 2010; Zarinpoush, 2006). Field experiments are also conducted (John, 2017). What these methods have in common in the practice of policy-relevant research is a grounding in positivism and the common notion that “evaluations must be independent, impartial and credible” and that they constitute “an objective assessment of a subject free from undue influences that distort or bias the conduct or findings” (United Nations, 2019, p. 3). This is an example of explicit positivist language, and the positivist underpinning of policy-relevant research is again revealed. In its evaluation policy, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) points out that “evaluations will be undertaken in a manner that ensures credibility, unbiasedness, transparency, and the generation of high-quality information and knowledge” (USAID, 2016, p. 9). USAID further asks for replication and “evaluation findings that are based on facts, evidence, and data” (USAID, 2016, p. 10). Similar language can, for example, be found in the Austrian Development Agency's guidelines (Austrian Development Agency, 2020) and in many Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) manuals.

Organizations, donors, and evaluation experts form a professional network: an epistemic community (Haas, 1992) or an epistemic system, which can arise by design or evolution (Goldman, 2011; Whitcomb, 2011). The verification, and hence sustainability, of certain practices among members are features of an epistemic system and make for strong professional practices and beliefs. The watershed moment that brought positivism into the epistemic community of donors, policy-makers, and M&E experts working on peacebuilding and international

development was most probably the evidence-based turn. It introduced a research agenda with a focus on “defining, managing and measuring” results (Hatton & Schroeder, 2007, p. 426), a predilection for empirical evidence (Sutcliffe & Court, 2006), and the understanding that evidence needs to be technical, neutral, and value-free (Eyben, 2015). This trend was a departure from the ideologically driven international development of earlier years, particularly the Washington Consensus with its understanding that projects foremost needed to subscribe to liberal economic values. Dean Karlan and Jacob Appel state that “conversations about poverty alleviation and development are [today] much more focused on evidence than they were before” (Karlan & Appel, 2016, p. 2), and Nicole Stremlau notes how “international development donors have become increasingly preoccupied with how ‘evidence’ can ground policymaking” (Stremlau, 2014, p. 1).

Empirical evidence is essential for donor decisions (Sutcliffe & Court, 2006, p. 2). The increasing demand for empirical evidence has been linked to two major concerns in international development: (1) that most development agencies report outputs, not outcomes; and (2) that related to and as a consequence of this, there is very little reliable evidence about the actual results of projects and interventions (Bamberger et al., 2010, p. 614). Whether development projects and policy decisions indeed contribute to democratization, poverty eradication, and reduction of illiteracy (among other issues), and to what extent, can thus still be seen as open to debate. In general, there is discussion in the international development community and among academics and practitioners regarding the evidence-based framework, with some being very critical of it and others seeing benefits in the approach (Eyben & Guijt, 2015, chap. 1). For example, it has been said that “quantitatively oriented development researchers, if not the development community as a whole, have responded enthusiastically to the evaluation challenge” (Bamberger et al., 2010, p. 615). Much of the research in the field of international development and on policy-relevant questions, though, as stated above, by no means all, has since the introduction of the evidence-based turn been done using quantitative instruments such as social surveys, and a need for “objective” data is clearly phrased by donor agencies, as shown above.

### 3 | SOCIAL SURVEYS AS A PREFERRED METHOD

For decades, since the beginning of the last century, researchers have found surveys to be a useful instrument for data collection (Bulmer, 2001). They produce quantitative descriptions of people's lives and aim to make experiences comparable through different contexts (Balnaves & Caputi, 2001; Fowler, 1984). They are “a feasible and relatively economical means of collecting social data” (Bulmer, 1993, p. 8). Also, numerical data is understood to be objective (Merry, 2016; Porter, 1995), and “quantification...offers concrete, numerical information that allows for easy comparison and ranking of countries, schools, job applicants, teachers, and much else” (Merry, 2016, p. 1). Furthermore, quantitative research is “most of the time...concerned with cause – with questions about whether some intervention works” (Turner, 2007, p. 121). Hence, it offers answers to the questions asked by development agencies and donors as to whether a programme or project works.

Besides all these advantages, there are also well-known problems with surveys. The data collected may be of poor quality, as Morten Jerven (2013) described in the context of fieldwork in Africa, showing how poor quantitative data misled the understanding of economic development. Others described problematic self-reporting (Magee & Doces, 2015) and meagre self-assessment. For example, the actual number of saplings planted in India was significantly lower than the demand for saplings that farmers had reported in a survey. The authors of this study concluded that procedural and more long-term engagement with the surveyed population would have led to better survey results, where “better” means describing actual needs (Sushant et al., 2018). This gap between reported and actual behaviour is a well-known issue for survey research (Dauti, 2021). With regard to media interventions, Jessica Noske-Turner depicted less ideal research and evaluation practices with “some...added a survey or some statistics..., but it was rare for quantitative data to be statistically representative or reliable, with commonly reported issues in the quality of sampling and lack of trust in local

ratings agencies and research institutes” (Noske-Turner, 2017, p. 10). Correct sampling can be problematic in conflicted-affected countries where there is often no reliable census, making the representative modelling of the target audience impossible or nearly so. Other challenges for survey research include bias (Fowler, 1984; Weisberg & Bowen, 1977) and “accuracy limitations” (Zarkovich, 1993, p. 103), such as misunderstandings and confusion about the questions asked and concepts used on a questionnaire. Such misunderstandings are persistent when questions are oversimplified. Surveys have been critiqued for introducing concepts that might be removed from local reality, although there have been attempts to overcome this particular problem (Firchow, 2018).

In general, and despite the well-known problems, there is a tendency among policy-makers to value simplified, reductionist knowledge over complex, contextual knowledge (Perera, 2017b). This tendency might be understandable given the need for accountability and transparency; however, omitting the context can lead to erroneous research results. The lack of a discussion of how knowledge is produced and not gathered and the researcher's separation from the presumed objective reality, as well as the consequent lack of researcher reflexivity, are all well-known points of critique with regard to research underpinned by positivism (Alveson & Skoeldberg, 2009). The failure to consider researcher effects in positivist research is all the more puzzling as the enumerator effect is well known in survey research. How enumerators or survey interviewers influence survey results has been described, for instance in relation to religion (Blaydes & Gillum, 2013), public health (Davis et al., 2010), and, in more general terms, in the literature on methodology (Singh, 1990; West & Blom, 2016). The question of whether interviewer or enumerator effects matter has also recently been posed in international development (Pietrelli et al., 2021). This rich literature is concerned with the effects that surveyor characteristics might have on the surveyed, thus showing how research is shaped by social relationships. However, the thus far under-researched relationship between the researcher and the surveyors can also have an impact. In countries affected by conflict or experiencing its aftermath, and in the context of international development, this relationship is often between an international researcher and locally hired surveyors, which can further affect the research results.

This section has shown the positivist grounding of policy-relevant research and reviewed the potential problems of such an approach, particularly when it comes to social surveys. The following section looks further at survey research in South Sudan, shedding further light on the problems with positivist research in international development and peacebuilding.

## 4 | DATA GATHERING IN SOUTH SUDAN

The following description of data gathering for quantitative research in South Sudan shows how the researcher's positionality, as seen by the locally hired surveyors, created unexpected glitches that resulted in two dissimilar data sets delivered by the same questionnaire. This inability to repeat survey research and gather approximately the same data shows that reflexivity is essential, and that positionality needs to be considered, when collecting quantitative data.

Positionality “refers to the perspective, orientation and situatedness of the researcher vis-à-vis the researchees” (Henry et al., 2009, p. 468). It concerns the individual or the team conducting the research as well as the researcher's self and their position towards the research and the research participants. A researcher's gender, class, and ethnicity can all play an important role; thus, positionality is about asking and acknowledging the questions, “who am I?” and “how is who I am influencing aspects of the research?” (Bourke, 2014, p. 2; Tomiak, 2019, p. 98). In positivist research, such considerations are seldom present, and while, as mentioned above, enumerator effects are well known, the management of these effects is mainly limited to the idea of matching interviewers with the respondents' sociodemographic features (Davis et al., 2010). In policy-relevant research in conflict-affected and divided countries, such as South Sudan, this rarely happens, and the relationship between lead researcher and locally hired surveyors creates an additional field for potential researcher effects.

The conclusions presented here are based on a comparison of a social survey conducted twice in Juba in 2014 and 2015, and subsequent semi-structured interviews with the locally hired surveyors. The circumstances of the two surveys were roughly similar, with the exception being the social distance of the international researcher—to the locally hired surveyors. This was not planned initially; the survey was originally part of a wider research project that investigated the effects of Western-led media development in a post-conflict country (Tomiak, 2022). When the survey was conducted the first time, in December 2014, it delivered problematic data for the planned analysis, which led to the decision to conduct the survey a second time. This was then done in July 2015. The second survey delivered different results which fitted the planned analysis for the question on media interventions. Still, together the two surveys gave rise to the question of why the results were different and the meaning of this for policy-relevant research in conflict-affected and impoverished environments more generally. Subsequent semi-structured interviews with the student-surveyors led to the conclusion that the distance to, knowledge of, and, thus, position of the researcher towards the surveyors, together with the research environment—South Sudan—were the main reasons why the two surveys produced different data. At the same time, the research conducted—surveys and interviews—provided insights into the social reality of South Sudan that were potentially meaningful for possible future media projects. In the next section, the two surveys and the interviews subsequently carried out are described in more detail.

## 5 | THE TWO SURVEYS AND SUBSEQUENT INTERVIEWS WITH THE SURVEYORS

A comparison of the data produced by survey one and survey two, the recruitment process, and the statements of the locally hired surveyors led to the conclusion that the researcher's positionality led to the tremendously different data sets and thus influenced the research. The survey research was conducted as part of a larger project on media development. In particular, the aim was to find out about people's media usage, the preference for one or another of the radio stations active in Juba, and if these preferences were connected to opinion about the South Sudanese government and attitudes towards different ethnic groups in the country. The questionnaire thus consisted of questions that would have been used in a baseline study, asking about time spent listening to broadcasts, but also asked respondents to rank specific statements about attitudes towards the government and ethnic groups on a Likert scale. Prior to the research, the questionnaire had been discussed extensively with a panel of experts—six South Sudanese nationals, among them journalists, teachers, and employees at international and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Following this, the questionnaire had been pre-tested. A test-run was conducted, with two South Sudanese acquaintances voluntarily distributing 50 questionnaires. Paper questionnaires were used. For the actual surveys, both times sample size had been calculated with a margin error of 5%, a confidence level of 94%, and a standard derivation of 0.5. The biggest problem was population size: the last census in southern and northern Sudan, prior to the research, had been conducted in 2008 before the country became independent. The validity of this census is questionable at best; results were said to be increased or decreased due to logistic challenges but also for political reasons (Afrol, 2009; Fick, 2009; Thompkins, 2009). In this census, the population of Juba was given as 368,436 inhabitants (National Bureau of Statistics, 2008). In the years between this census and the start of the research project described here, the country had conducted a referendum on secession from Sudan, declared its independence, and experienced a new outbreak of violent conflict. It could reasonably be assumed that the population number given in 2008 was no longer valid, if it had ever been true to begin with. Thus, determining population size was sheer guesswork, a common problem for surveys conducted in post/conflict countries. Population size was decided at 1.5 million people, and the sample size was calculated  $(Z\text{-score})^2 \times \text{StdDev} \times (1\text{-StdDev}) / (\text{margin of error})$  at 354. For each of the two surveys, 500 questionnaires were distributed to allow for data cleaning and potential loss of questionnaires. Twenty South Sudanese students from Juba University were employed for each survey, tasked with distributing 25 questionnaires using a snowball

system for data collection to protect the surveyors' safety. Due to the country's problematic security situation, discussions of rather sensitive topics, like the media or the government, either with strangers or in public, was not advisable.

Up to this point, methodological choices were similar for what would become survey one and survey two. The first survey was conducted in December 2014. When the questionnaires came back, they showed various issues that rendered the data collected invalid: multiple boxes had been ticked where only one answer was permitted, categories had been included, and comments were scribbled in the margins. Because of this, the survey was repeated under similar circumstances in July 2015. At that point, it delivered different data and did not show any of the issues experienced with survey one. Despite similar methodological choices, the outcome of the two surveys was remarkably different.

This led to the question about why these differences had occurred, and to investigate this question further, the data, the questionnaires, and field notes were compared to examine the similarities and differences between the practice of conducting the surveys. Also, interviews were conducted with the student-surveyors. Twenty students from the Political Science Department had been working on survey one and 20 students from the Mass Communication Department were employed for survey two. All 40 students were asked to participate in semi-structured interviews. Interview questions centred around three points: (1) the student-surveyors' experience in conducting the survey, how they contacted respondents and decided whom to contact, and their practices of filling in the questionnaire; (2) the recruitment process and training given, how they heard of the opportunity and put their name down for it, and how they experienced the training; and (3) their perception of me as the international researcher and employer. While the direction of the interviews was preordained, within this framework student-surveyors were encouraged to describe their experiences in depth and in their own words. Using prompts and probes, the aim was to encourage a conversation to gain an understanding of the student-surveyors' experience of the recruitment, training, and surveying processes and practices. Of the 40 student-surveyors who worked on the two surveys, 25 agreed to participate in formal, recorded interviews; 12 of these had worked on survey one, 13 on survey two. The interviews, which lasted on average 60 to 90 minutes, were audio recorded on an iPhone and later transcribed. Another 12 student-surveyors, eight from survey one and four from survey two, agreed to share their experiences, but only in rather informal exchanges that were not recorded. These chats also lasted on average 60 minutes and extensive notes were taken. The interviews and notes were analysed using thematic analysis. As the most remarkable difference between the two surveys was the recruitment process, showing the importance of the lead researcher's positionality, I will detail this in the next section, before turning to the analysis of data and the findings.

## 5.1 | Recruitment of the student-surveyors

Survey one was conducted in December 2014. Twenty fourth-year students from Juba University's Political Science Department were employed. A personal contact at the university allowed for an easy recruitment process: an acquaintance who worked in a senior position at Juba University. They arranged for a group of students to work as surveyors, and a date was set for me to meet with them, explain the research, and provide some training. On the day, my acquaintance accompanied me to the classroom, introduced me to the students, and asked them "to help my friend and colleague Ms. Kerstin with her very important research" (field notes, December 2, 2014). The research aims and how the questionnaire should be completed were explained during a 90-minute training session. The brevity of this training was a concern, but I was assured that research training was part of a degree programme at Juba University, and some of the students had worked as surveyors before. Contact information was provided in case of additional questions, and a time for collecting the completed questionnaires and payment was arranged. As mentioned, this survey delivered highly problematic data, with scribbles in the margin and additional categories. Thus, the survey was repeated in July 2015.



For the second survey a more informal recruitment process took place. In July 2015 I had spent roughly 10 months in South Sudan, and during this time, ties to the university had strengthened; I had taught a class at the Department of Mass Communication. For the second recruitment process, to keep circumstances comparable, students were again approached through a faculty member; but this time, they had seen me on university premises and knew that I was teaching there. While the students approached were not my students, I had met many of them on campus. When their lecturer approached them with the offer to do some survey work for me, and when I entered their classroom to provide training, the students already knew who I was. This survey delivered quality data: the students had followed my instructions to the letter.

As the recruitment process and knowledge of me were the only significant differences between the two surveys, this seems to have been the main, or at least an essential, reason for the different data collected. To examine this premise—that the difference in distance, and thus, the researcher's positionality, had affected the data-gathering processes—the interviews described above were conducted with the student-surveyors.

## 6 | INSIGHTS FROM THE QUESTIONNAIRES AND INTERVIEWS

The two sets of data, consisting of the questionnaires (the data collected and survey results) and the interviews (conducted with the student-surveyors after the data gathering), provided three insights: (1) that the way the surveyors perceived me had a significant impact on the data-gathering process; (2) that this perception of me, together with the environment where the research took place and the situation of the locally hired surveyors played an important role; and (3) that reflexivity and acknowledgement of the researcher's positionality does not weaken research results, but is in fact necessary to identify and manage potential researcher effects. The two sets of questionnaires on the question of media development delivered significantly different data, with the data from the first survey being problematic for the planned analysis. The reason for this significantly different data was that the student-surveyors' perception of me, the lead researcher, differed in a substantial way. The interviews showed that the students who worked on survey one had seen me as an influential person with the ability to provide further, and potentially more permanent, employment. This (incorrect) assumption, together with the problematic economic situation in South Sudan, made one set of the student-surveyors want to stand out as surveyors in the hope of recommending themselves for future work opportunities. The second set of students, who had a clearer idea of who I was, did not feel this need. This is explored in more detail in this section, which looks at the questionnaires as visual representations of the data-gathering process, at the recruitment and training processes of the two surveys and the interview data of the two sets of student-surveyors.

In the questionnaires of the first survey, comments had been scribbled in the margins, additional categories had been added, and multiple boxes had been ticked on questions for which only one answer was required. Thus, a total of 17 subcategories of the independent variable had been created for the question on which radio station respondents listened to the most. With these 17 subcategories, with several having only one or two instances, statistical power was drastically reduced; a meaningful analysis of the initial research question regarding democratization and the peacebuilding effects of the media was close to impossible. Data-reduction methods would have been an option to make the data behave, and the idea of cleaning unruly data is common in quantitative analysis. Advice is given on how to detect and tame nasty data (McClelland, 2000). Data cleaning refers to removing unusable, incomprehensible, or simply unnecessary data from a data set. This process, however, typically starts when the data are already entered into an analysis software such as SPSS. In this way, the data are "cleaned" on being transferred from the questionnaires to the computer, becoming a more ordered version of themselves. Instead of this, questionnaires filled out by hand can also be understood not just as containers of information but as visual representations of a thought process. As such, paper questionnaires can reveal additional information.

Visual inspection of the questionnaires from the first survey gave rise to the suspicion that some kind of negotiation process had been ongoing between the surveyors and the participants. The questionnaires showed that in

all cases the student-surveyors asked the questions and ticked the boxes as they had been asked to do. They had also been instructed to explain the questions to the interviewees, if necessary. With these instructions, the same handwriting would have been expected to feature on each set of 25 questionnaires that had been administered by one student. This was indeed the case for both surveys. On the survey one questionnaires, besides the categories included and the multiple ticking of boxes, on various occasions boxes had been ticked, crossed out, and either a different box or the same box then ticked again. This could be seen on more than half of the returned questionnaires of survey one to varying extents. The practice had been especially prominent on 76 questionnaires, which were filled out by four different student-surveyors of survey one, judging by the handwriting. Especially, the ticked, crossed out, and reticked boxes were seen as a sign that questions were not simply read out to and then answered by the participants, but that there had been a “back and forth” kind of discussion, a negotiation between the surveyor and the interviewees.

That there had indeed been discussion when the questionnaires were filled out was confirmed by subsequent interviews with the student-surveyors employed for the first survey. In a chance meeting in Juba on May 15, 2015, one of the student-surveyors (MMD) stated that they “always asked people for what else I should tick on the questionnaire.” And this, they added, made them the “best surveyor,” although they did confirm that some of the respondents did offer multiple answers upfront. If they did not do this, however, the student-surveyor had pushed for more than one answer. Questioned further, they said that most of the other interviewers pressed for more answers as well. On being asked why they thought that ticking as many boxes as possible was good, the student-surveyor answered that “foreigners always want as many answers as possible.” Foreigners, they went on, also always wanted to hear about certain topics, such as gender. The absence of this topic on the questionnaire had confused several student-surveyors, and thus they had included this category. Asked why they had not called and asked about this, the same student-surveyor said that they did not want to bother me with something so minor that they could quickly solve on their own.

In subsequently arranged interviews with the other surveyors, the remarks were confirmed. The desire to do good work, impress me, and deliver as much insight as possible featured prominently; and all were, although to different extents, connected to the need to find further paid work or even permanent employment. Another student-surveyor (KgH) said on June 2, 2015, that “it is important to do good work for you” and that good work was constituted by collecting lots of data. Another (FRS) commented on the same date also that they had sought “as much data as possible, so I asked for more answers.” The students connected their wish to do good work to a desire to impress me and the need to find employment. Student DAW, also on June 2, 2015, said that “if I bring many data, then I can maybe work for the organization you are working for” and this sentiment was repeatedly mentioned by other students. Students had assumed that I worked for an international NGO or even for the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). When meeting the students, no organization had been mentioned; rather, I had said that I was a researcher from a university. Interview data showed that the students' assumptions about my influence were based partly on skin colour. Being a *kawaja*, a person of white skin colour, the students assumed that I had a high-ranking job and would consequently be able to provide additional work. Second, the students had been approached by a senior member of their faculty, who had pointed out the importance of my work. This senior member's comments had resulted in the students feeling under more pressure. Consequently, they wanted to please me by providing excellent data without pestering me with additional questions. Being near the end of their studies, they also felt the strain of finding employment, a problematic endeavour given the economic situation in South Sudan.

Such thoughts and issues did not surface when the survey was conducted for the second time. The aim of survey two was not only to answer the initial research question about the effects of media development and media preferences but also to test the idea that a researcher's positionality together with the research environment can have a significant impact on the process of gathering quantitative data. To this end, the second survey was conducted in as similar circumstances as possible to the first. The only notable difference was how the recruitment process was conducted and how I, as the lead researcher, was presented to the

students during the employment process. Visible inspection of the questionnaires from survey two hinted at a smooth survey process; there were no comments in the margins and no multiple ticking of boxes. In the follow-up interviews, one surveyor (KW) from the second group of students commented in an interview on July 3, 2015 that “I wanted to do good work, so I did what I was told,” and another (HGa) said on July 30, 2015 that “foreigners want as many answers as possible, but I thought it important to keep with your instructions,” and another (FT), also on 30 July, stated simply, “I did as you said.” When talking to the class about how to fill out the questionnaire, I had avoided longer training and an emphasis on the importance of sticking to the instructions to remain as close as possible to the first survey's instructions. However, the second set of students, although under the same stress to find employment, did not make assumptions about who I was, nor did they mention a need or wish to impress me. Consequently, they simply followed the instructions given, and this resulted in a very different data set than the one produced through the questionnaires of the first survey. This raises questions about the possibility of replicating a study on policy-relevant questions in a post-conflict, low-income country. While it is certainly possible that two analysts working with either the data set of survey one or survey two would come to the same conclusions, the data sets themselves are different, even though they were conducted with the same instruments and under similar circumstances, except for the introduction and consequent perception of the lead researcher by the locally hired surveyors. This means, first, that the researcher's positionality, understood as how the researcher might be perceived by people participating in the research, can affect the research results and needs to be considered. Second, the perception of the lead researcher had an effect on the students employed for survey one because of the economic situation in the particular research environment. This is explored further in the next section.

## 7 | THE ENVIRONMENT AS PART OF THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

The comparison of the two surveys and the insights from the semi-structured interviews showed the importance of considering researcher effects and the environment in which the research takes place. The economic situation in South Sudan, and the wish and need to find additional employment opportunities, maybe even more steady employment, were part of the reason why the student-surveyors of survey one had pushed the interviewees for additional answers and included extra topics in the questionnaire. In this way, by influencing the research outcome, the environment itself was a vital and significant part of the research context.

South Sudan is the world's youngest country; it became independent from Sudan in 2011 following a popular vote. The separation from Sudan was seen as ending one of the bloodiest and most prolonged wars in Africa, and South Sudan's independence was greeted with joy and pride by its citizens. The international community started a massive development campaign. But South Sudan plunged back into violent conflict in December 2013 and has not emerged from this since. Consequently, the country's economic situation went from bad to worse. During my stay of roughly 10 months from November 2014 to August 2015, the South Sudanese pound rapidly lost value, while at the same time, prices for food and goods rocketed. This situation affected the student-surveyors who had been employed for survey one as well as those that were employed for survey two; as they were nearing graduation, finding employment was both important and problematic. Still, the students' perception of me was different. For the survey one student-surveyors, it was shaped by my whiteness and the introduction by and remarks of a high-ranking faculty member. The difficult economic situation together with their perception of me led to a desire on the students' part to provide excellent work, which included a willingness to push for additional data and an unwillingness to ask for clarification and further instruction. The research design and methods had been explained, but the surveyors came up with their own sets of interpretations and ideas, as indicated by the comment on June 2, 2015 by one student (IG) that “the more answers one gives, the better.” They also came up with their own agenda, as indicated by another student (JEK) on the same day, “I wanted to gain a reputation as a good interviewer to get more work,” which prevented them from simply seeking clarification.

This shows that data are indeed not collected independently from their surroundings, but is instead shaped by the context. How the locally hired surveyors perceive the researcher can affect the data collected. Furthermore, it shows that the environment in which the research takes place also affects the data-gathering process and, consequently, the research. In a country in dire circumstances, such as South Sudan, economic pressure has a different, probably stronger, effect on surveyors than in a more economically secure environment. In this way, data are connected to and influenced by the research environment. Knowing and understanding the research environment is thus of critical importance. Strong arguments have been made for immersion when it comes to ethnographic interviewing (Nair, 2021). But immersion is, as has been shown, as important in quantitative interviewing and survey research; it can, as shown in the next section, serve as a strategy to manage researcher effects.

## 8 | MANAGING RESEARCHER EFFECTS

In research underpinned by positivism, the acknowledgement of possible interviewer effects is omitted because this acknowledgement would be seen as weakening the research results. Positivism rests on the idea that facts can be extracted from a reality that exists independent of the researcher and the research situation; hence, there cannot be an interviewer effect. By the same logic, reflexivity is neither necessary nor requested; the consideration of the researcher's position towards either the surveyors or the respondents is not needed when truth is believed to be derived from reality. The experience of doing survey research in South Sudan, however, shows how the researcher's positionality and the locally hired surveyors' perceptions of the researcher, together with the country's economic situation, resulted in the collection of two dissimilar data sets. This shows that quantitative data are not extracted from reality but constructed and that social relations and research environments shape the data. With this, the question of whether and how such interviewer effects can be managed arose.

In qualitative research, researcher effects are well known. The interview is a social situation where "knowledge is produced through the interaction between an interviewer and an interviewee" (Kvale, 2007, p. xvii), the answers gained in interviews are shaped by the dynamics of the research situation (Johnson & Rowlands, 2012), and "interviewees respond differentially to visible cues provided by the interviewer" (Webb et al., 1966, p. 21). Doing survey research in South Sudan showed that such interviewer effects also play out in quantitative research and between the researcher and the nationally employed surveyors, and this relationship affects the data gathered.

Qualitative researchers' answer to this problem is the acknowledgement that the researcher is conducive in the research process and the consequent move to reflexivity and consideration of researcher positionality. Employing reflexivity in quantitative research and understanding data gathering as a social situation that affects the data collected would make researcher effects manageable, at least to an extent. Being aware of one's position towards the surveyors—namely, how they might perceive the lead researcher and how the research environment might affect data gathering—helps to understand the complex social dynamics that underlie the research situation and affect the research results. Not being reflexive, on the other hand, does not prevent these issues; they merely remain in the dark and the impact on the data is ignored, unrealized, or misunderstood. This is especially, but not exclusively, important when it comes to policy interventions and international development projects in countries affected by violent conflict and poverty.

## 9 | CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This article investigates the process of conducting survey research in South Sudan. Much research on peace-building and international development is based on positivism and explicitly asks for neutral and objective data gathering and analysis. The article shows that such neutrality and objectivity can hardly be achieved, but that research happens in social relations that shape the research process and, consequently, the research results.

Hence, the argument put forward here advocates acknowledging the researcher's positionality and the use of a reflexive approach in quantitative social research, in particular when investigating policy interventions and international development projects. Conducting a social survey in South Sudan's capital, Juba, on two separate occasions under similar circumstances and subsequent semi-structured interviews with the locally hired surveyors showed how the surveyors reacted to their perception of me, the lead researcher. This perception was based on the extent of their knowledge of me, my skin colour, and how I was introduced to the surveyors. Having been introduced by a high-ranking faculty member, the students employed for the first survey perceived me as someone with the power to provide employment opportunities. The students employed for the second survey, on the other hand, knew me by sight and by reputation after I had taught a course at the university; they knew that I did not wield that power. This made a difference to the data that were collected, and therefore I conclude that data are not gathered in an independently existing reality but is produced and shaped by social relations.

Some critiques are possible and reasonable. For example, the training provided to the student-surveyors was short in both cases, and raises the question of whether this brevity was the reason for delivering problematic data. But as the same amount of training was provided for both surveys, it seems that training time was of only minor importance. More extended training periods would have been desirable but would probably not have prevented the researcher effects. As a response to my worries about the limited training provided, I was told that research training was part of a degree at Juba University; also, some of the students employed had previously worked as surveyors. The researcher effects were not, or not solely, triggered by ignorance of the research method but by the students' perception of the lead researcher. Additional factors probably played a role, but the interviews showed that the students' perception of the lead researcher featured prominently. It could further be argued that the use of paper questionnaires was problematic and that using tablets instead would have prevented the locally hired surveyors from adding categories or ticking more boxes than permitted. Tablets, however, are not necessarily a feasible option for much research in international development and peacebuilding due to the scarcity of funds and electricity. Further, it is unclear that the negotiation process I described would not have happened if tablets had been used. Rather, the negotiation process would simply have remained invisible. Lastly, much policy-relevant and applied research in international development and peacebuilding is done with the use of professional local survey companies. Again, this would not change but would simply omit the presence of researcher effects. My conclusion is not that the perception of the lead researcher is the *only* potential cause for researcher effects; rather that there *are* researcher effects present in quantitative research. The problems encountered here are not simply issues that arise in underfunded and under-resourced survey research, but point to a more general problem when positionality is not considered.

In the practice of international development and policy-relevant research, the evidence-based turn has led to a research culture that values positivism. Positivism is grounded in the idea that an objective reality exists that is independent of context and the researcher and that it can be measured using the right methods in a rigorous way. Acknowledging interviewer or researcher effects and researcher positionality is standard practice in interpretative and qualitative research; they are also recognized in quantitative research, although to a much lesser extent. This article shows the need to further extend this recognition. Omitting researcher effects does not eliminate them, but simply occludes them. They need to be brought out into the open so that they can be managed, that is, understood, made explicit, and acknowledged.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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