


# From a Distance: The ‘New Normal’ for Researchers and Research Assistants Engaged in Remote Fieldwork

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## Abstract

Doing remote fieldwork is a ‘new normal’ in the COVID-19 pandemic era. It is challenging, but not impossible. With planning and preparation, comprehensive training and ongoing support for Research Assistants (RAs), researchers can overcome the challenges of remote fieldwork. In this article, we reflect on the experience of employing local RAs to support doctoral research involving in-depth household interviews and focus group discussions with ethnic minority people in upland Vietnam. The challenge of adapting to this ‘new normal’ provided us with an opportunity for a critical appraisal of the researcher–RA relationship. The approach to remote fieldwork we developed centres on frequent communication, feedback and building trusting team dynamics. We argue that this approach can overcome some of the power hierarchies between global north researchers and local RAs, and therefore, should not simply be seen as a temporary or inferior ‘Plan B’ for researchers, but should be embraced as a way of reimagining knowledge production. We discuss lessons learned in how to carry out remote fieldwork, present practical strategies and recommendations, and consider the strengths of this approach for knowledge production and the empowerment of researchers in the global south.

## Keywords

research assistants, remote research, distance research, remote fieldwork, researcher, qualitative, fieldwork

## Introduction

In March 2020, the world changed dramatically due to the coronavirus outbreak. National borders closed, profoundly altering international travel and rendering a ‘new normal’ way of life. Carefully planned fieldwork strategies were rendered impossible. Researchers needed to quickly adapt to a different world, precipitating rapid academic publications regarding COVID-19 and its influence on empirical research (Laato et al., 2020; Nability-Grover et al., 2020; Prommegger et al., 2020). A central question for researchers is: how do we adapt our previous research plans, within a similar time frame, to ensure a successful study and uphold data quality, all while maintaining our responsibility to act as ethical researchers (Chaudhuri, 2020; Krause et al., 2021; Mitchell, 2021)? Echoing the exasperation of many researchers, participatory research guru Robert Chambers exclaimed ‘I don’t want to know in a year or two what I need to know now!’ (Chambers, 2020:1).

For qualitative social scientists in particular, the pandemic has increased the complexities of fieldwork, especially for those who planned to travel to remote areas for in-person fieldwork. In this article, we critically reflect on the process the first author (a PhD student – ‘Phuong’) went through in pivoting to remote international fieldwork working with local Research Assistants (RAs). We discuss lessons learnt in how to prepare for and carry out remote fieldwork, and consider the strengths of this approach for knowledge production and the empowerment of researchers in the global south. From our

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perspective, as a team of supervisors and a doctoral student, the challenge of adapting to a 'new normal' provided an opportunity for a critical appraisal of the researcher–RA relationship (Middleton & Cons, 2014).

Research assistants have long been deployed in social science fieldwork to aid in situations where the researcher is an outsider and relies on local people for assistance to navigate cultural, language and logistical aspects of field research. Despite this reliance on local RAs, a relatively limited body of literature discusses their roles, the potential for RAs to be empowered as a direct result of the process and the central ways in which they shape knowledge production (Anwar & Vigar, 2017; Cons, 2014; Gupta, 2014). While literature has begun to address a number of ethical, practical and conceptual concerns regarding the role of RAs (Michaud, 2010; Molony & Hammett, 2007; Molyneux et al., 2009; Randall et al., 2013), specifically concerning research in conflict scenarios (Anwar & Vigar, 2017; Moss & Hajj, 2020), academic discussion of the role of RAs in qualitative fieldwork remains relatively limited (Anwar & Vigar, 2017).

In circumstances when the researcher is not present, the role of the RA becomes significantly more important, requiring researchers to critically reflect on the researcher–RA relationship. This article contributes to the literature by sharing the experience of employing local RAs to support doctoral research involving in-depth household interviews and focus group discussions with ethnic minority people in upland Vietnam. We argue that the approach we developed regarding the RA–researcher relationship can overcome some of the power hierarchies between global north researchers and local RAs, and therefore should not simply be seen as a temporary 'Plan B', but should be embraced as a way of reimagining knowledge production. In what follows, we first discuss the scholarship on remote fieldwork and researcher–RA relationships. Reflecting on the challenges of remote research, we then propose practical strategies and recommendations for working with RAs in the absence of the key researcher. We consider how, against the backdrop of significant threats posed to our 'normal' research approach, this crisis could revitalise our understanding of a 'new normal' relationship between researchers and their assistants.

## Role of Research Assistants in Qualitative Research

Research assistants play an essential role in supporting researchers to connect with participants, particularly in cross-cultural research settings presenting cultural and language barriers (Deane & Stevano, 2015; Temple & Young, 2004; Turner, 2010a). RAs are not simply translators or interpreters; they are also cultural advisors, facilitators, mediators and coordinators (Bujra, 2006; Middleton & Cons, 2014). Previous scholarship is focused on settings where the researcher is

present, and concentrates on the dynamics between the researcher, the RA and research participants, including positionality, subjectivity, culture, language and ownership (Anwar & Vigar, 2017; Cons, 2014; Gold & Gujar, 2002; Molony & Hammett, 2007; Middleton & Pradhan, 2014; Turner, 2010a; Valentine, 2005). The reality for researchers in the global pandemic is that most of us cannot travel to do research and therefore have to rely on less familiar methods (Archibald et al., 2019; Battersby, 2021). Many have utilised alternatives such as social media analysis (Ghosh, 2020), virtual mediums such as Zoom and Skype (Archibald et al., 2019; Burke & Patching, 2021; Hanna, 2012; Jowett et al., 2011), and phone surveys (Chaudhuri, 2020; Cheema et al., 2021; Etang & Himelein, 2020). However, researchers working in areas with limited internet penetration, or no access to internet, need to find alternative ways to pursue face-to-face research. In our case, the research involved interviews and focus groups with ethnic minority women in upland Vietnam, in remote villages with limited access to technology, and therefore face-to-face fieldwork was still required to ensure we included the voices of ethnic minority people.

There are precedents for this kind of remote fieldwork amongst researchers who have had to rapidly adapt fieldwork plans due to the outbreak of conflict (Mead and Metreaux 2000; Moss & Hajj, 2020) or natural disasters (Skinner, 2007) that make 'being there' unsafe or impossible. For example, Skuse (1999) had to adapt fieldwork plans and employed four local RAs in Afghanistan when the Taliban took control and blocked access to his fieldwork. Remote research with local RAs adds a new dimension to the researcher–RA relationship, as the RAs are the sole data collectors and the researcher is not there to guide the process or intervene when necessary (Prommegger et al., 2020; Stevano & Deane, 2017). In this context, the RA takes on an expanded role in the production of knowledge, often selecting research participants, working with gatekeepers, and solving unexpected issues, which can often benefit the research as opposed to being merely an inferior plan (Anwar & Vigar, 2017; Deane & Stevano, 2015; Prommegger et al., 2020).

Increasing RAs' involvement raises questions concerning both the researchers' and the RAs' positionality and subjectivity, and the nature of how the RAs' involvement shapes the research process. Temple and Edwards (2002, p. 6) call the interactions between the interviewer, the interpreter, and the research participant in cross-language research 'triple-subjectivity'. Adding the dimension of distance to the 'triple subjectivity' of researcher–RA–research participant relationships highlights our continued responsibility to consider ethical dilemmas concerning the roles, reflexivity and positionality of RAs in the research process, particularly the negotiation of power relations between the researcher and RAs (Anwar & Vigar, 2017).

## Negotiating Power Relations Between Research Assistants and Researchers from the Global North

The researcher–RA relationship is predicated on a range of ‘emergent dependencies’ (Cons, 2014, p. 36), as the commodification of RA’s ethnographic labour shapes the data in important ways. It can be difficult for RAs to voice disagreements or alternative ideas given their financial dependence on the researcher. When the researcher is working remotely, this dependence may be felt even more acutely as the researcher is not present for immediate discussions if research plans are not working (Randall et al., 2013). The RA is usually invisible in research outputs, with little consideration of how RAs may gain (or be put at risk) from the process beyond the immediate financial reward. Until recently, few qualitative researchers have taken the politics of the researcher–RA relationship seriously, and discussions of perpetuated ‘hidden colonialism’ in research relationships continue to remain a taboo conversation (Anwar & Viqar, 2017; Middleton & Cons, 2014). Disregarding the politics of the researcher–RA relationship in this way leads to flawed processes, biased data and potentially misled or misunderstood results (Deane & Stevano, 2015). For example, if the researcher–RA relationship is only constructed around a transactional employer–employee relationship, the RA might be more likely to focus on completing data collection while downplaying ethical issues (Deane & Stevano, 2015).

Emerging scholarship critically examines the researcher–RA relationship and its influence on the politics of writing and representation (Cons, 2014; Gupta, 2014; Middleton & Cons, 2014). Researchers and RAs often occupy different class and social locations, as well as different epistemic worldviews, and bring their own values and preconceptions to the field (Anwar & Viqar, 2017). As Turner (2010b) notes regarding her research in Vietnam, the RAs’ own ethnicity, as well as their gender and age, influence their relationships with research participants. For example, government officials (usually older men in the Vietnamese context) may refuse to talk with young ethnic minority women RAs. If researchers do not reflect upon these aspects of RAs’ situatedness, the consequences remain invisible and the research rigour is potentially compromised. In order to create a space for reflexivity and to overcome power hierarchies in the researcher–RA relationship, scholars advocate that significant effort be dedicated to building relationships at the outset of research (Bergen, 2018). Formal training is important to ensure a common understanding of research aims, questions, and methodology, and beyond this, informal rapport building is also important to ensure a trusting relationship (Bergen, 2018). Turner (2010b) advises discussing interview dynamics with assistants before, during and after fieldwork, to facilitate insight into the intricacies involved in how RAs negotiate fieldwork relationships. It is naïve to think that RAs will willingly share any issues they are having with the research, given the power dynamics discussed

above, and therefore researchers must ascertain discreetly and diplomatically how the research assistant is viewing fieldwork and any concerns he or she might have (Bergen, 2018). Strategies to reduce the power imbalance and to build trust within the research team, including weekly meetings aiming to build open dialogue with RAs about their thoughts and experiences, are arguably even more important in a remote setting. For example, where internet is unavailable, mediation with visual and non-verbal cues is not possible, and disruptions caused by technical constraints can make rapport building more difficult (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Seitz, 2016; Van Coller-Peter & Manzini, 2020; Weller, 2017). In this context, it is imperative to build trust and a level of familiarity via regular meetings throughout the project (Anwar & Viqar, 2017).

Ethically, the pandemic also raises questions about our obligations as researchers to our RAs’ safety in the field (Moss & Hajj, 2020). Even in regions with low COVID-19 case count (such as in our research area at the time of research), deploying this methodology means that we are asking RAs to put themselves at risk. The RA may be coping with uncertainties, anxieties and mixed emotions (Anwar & Viqar, 2017). Keeping the communication channels open and building a trusting relationship is vital for the emotional well-being of RAs (Turner, 2010b). Moreover, enabling RA’s autonomy to adapt the research when needed for their own safety and for the safety of participants is paramount.

## Research Context

The research aimed to understand the potential and politics of development partnerships with micro, small and medium enterprises in Vietnam. It involved analysing three case studies of donor partnerships with the private sector in agriculture and tourism to support economic empowerment of ethnic minority women, a traditionally disadvantaged group in Vietnam. The field research explored how ethnic minority women fared in response to four empowerment dimensions – psychological, economic, political, and social (Scheyvens, 1999) – at both the individual and collective level (Rao & Kelleher, 2005), from their participation in agriculture and tourism value chains that are established through donor and private sector partnerships. The planned research methods included in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with women and men of the three ethnic minority groups, Tay, Hmong<sup>1</sup> and Dao,<sup>2</sup> in remote mountainous areas in northern Vietnam.

The research was designed during the COVID-19 pandemic from a New Zealand university (Massey University), where Phuong, a Vietnamese citizen, is based. Given the uncertainty over when border restrictions would be lifted to allow Phuong to travel to Vietnam to conduct fieldwork, we devised two research plans; Plan A: she would travel and conduct the fieldwork herself; and Plan B: in-country RAs would be recruited, trained, and coached to carry out the fieldwork. These plans were tested during an in-house ethics

process in the Development Studies programme, which considered issues such as: how to approach various gatekeepers in the community including local and provincial government officials; informed consent for participants; and options for maintaining confidentiality throughout the research process. In particular, gender equity issues were discussed in detail, specifically regarding how to deal with any sensitive research questions. Following this, institutional ethics approval was sought from the Massey University Human Ethics Committee, with both Plan A and Plan B presented. Ethical clearance was granted for both options on the 29th October 2020. As the pandemic progressed, Plan B was discussed with the supervision team and enacted.

## Process for Recruiting, Preparing and Supporting Research Assistants In-Country

### *Recruitment of Research Assistants*

Depending on the type and context of research, a researcher may choose to approach experienced or non-experienced RAs (Giff et al., 1991). Within the scope and limits of the budget for doctoral research, we chose to approach non-experienced RAs who were students of a regional university and a local college. Except for one RA who had prior experience conducting a quantitative survey, the other two RAs had never been involved in primary data collection. A lecturer at a local university was consulted about an appropriate rate of pay for the RAs, to ensure that they were paid the equivalent of the local rate for conducting a similar survey or interview work. This arrangement was explained to prospective RAs during the recruitment stage.

The first critical step in recruiting RAs was to develop terms of reference (TOR), which clearly outlined the research purpose, the scope of work, the timeframe, and specific requirements of the RAs. This TOR was shared with Phuong's Vietnamese networks to help with recruitment. A key criterion was that the RAs would be women who are fluent in the languages of the Tay, Hmong and Dao ethnic minority groups. Following applications and interviews with prospective RAs, we hired three young women university students, Lien, Sung, Thao (pseudonyms) each representing one of these ethnic groups.

Some disadvantages of working with less-skilled researchers are revealed in the section below; however, it is worth noting that there can also be advantages to this. For example, the RAs were fresh to conducting research and very willing to learn and were thus not constrained by pre-determined notions of what the research approach and questions should look like. The latter is an issue which a number of other researchers have raised in terms of the biases that researchers bring to research (Bourke, 2014; Qin, 2016; Sultana, 2007).

### *Preparing the Research Assistants for Field Research*

A clear plan was developed to train the RAs. We considered it crucial for them to understand the purpose of the research,

methodology and ethical issues, as well as developing a relationship with the research and other RAs. Phuong conducted eight training sessions via zoom with the RAs, covering the following topics:

- 1: Introducing each other and the research project;
- 2: Ethics
- 3: Theoretical framework, key concepts and terminologies;
- 4: RA expectations and training on in-depth interview methods (Brinkmann, 2013; Rogers, 1945);
- 5–8: Discussion of fieldwork safety issues, continued training on in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (Aurini et al., 2016; Brinkmann, 2013; Flick, 2007; Kamberelis et al., 2018).

The RAs were thus coached on the research methods and ethics, the theoretical framework and broader aims of the research, as well as key concepts employed in the research including 'gender', and 'women's economic empowerment'. In this way, the RAs could understand and convey these terms to the research participants in the appropriate language. The large number of training sessions conducted with the group of RAs enabled the team to build rapport with one another. In addition, the ratio of three RAs to one researcher helped create an environment where the RAs were more at ease with one another and the researcher observed that the RAs became more confident and contributed freely to discussions. The RAs could discuss with each other and raise their concerns together with the researcher. This was an important process for breaking down some of the power hierarchies that are often present in the researcher-RA relationship.

We developed in-depth interview and focus group discussion guidelines to guide the RAs on how to introduce the research, how to build rapport with the research participants, what to ask in lead questions, and what to ask in follow-up questions. The guidelines were based on Phuong and her supervisors' experiences working with RAs in similar contexts, and in response to the specific research needs and concerns raised by RAs. The RAs also practised in-depth interviews with their friends or family members and gave feedback on the questions. The latter process was very helpful as it enabled Phuong to re-write questions in a clearer manner prior to data collection commencing, and it enabled the whole team to ensure they understood the meaning of the questions and how they could be conveyed in different languages.

Selecting an appropriate tool that facilitated communication between Phuong and the RAs and allowed a large amount of data (photos, recordings and transcripts) to be shared between the research team was also important. Phuong selected a commonly-used Vietnamese communication app called Zalo because it could be installed on both mobile phone and computer, was familiar to the RAs, and allowed the transmission of large files. Phuong created a research group chat box in Zalo to allow for continuous communication between all members of the team, including guidelines on how to

**Table 1.** Interviews Conducted.

Case Study	Ethnicity	No. of Households	Participant Nos		Language Used in Interview
			Male	Female	
Case study 1	Hmong	7	7	4	Hmong
	Dao	7	3	5	Dao and Vietnamese <sup>a</sup>
	Tay	7	4	5	Tay and Vietnamese
Case study 2	Hmong	4	2	2	Hmong
	Tay	4	4	4	Vietnamese
	Dao	6	3	5	Vietnamese
Case study 3	Hmong	6	5	2	Hmong
	Dao	7	3	4	Vietnamese
<b>Total</b>		<b>48</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>31</b>	

<sup>a</sup>Vietnamese is locally known as 'Kinh'.

upload the recordings to Zalo should the RAs have any technical questions during fieldwork. In order to maintain privacy and confidentiality, Phuong set the Zalo group chat to only allow content sharing between accredited members. In addition, each RA emailed their transcripts and records directly to Phuong.

It is worth noting that while this training for specific tasks was sufficient for carrying out semi-structured interviews and focus groups, other research methodologies such as ethnography that require research skills in participant observation would need substantially more training (O'Reilly, 2012; Schensul et al., 1999).

### Support for Research Assistants during the Data Collection Phase

Data collection took place between the 21st March and the 18th April 2021. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a specific Health and Safety Plan outlined potential risks and a management and mitigation strategy was developed. At the time of the study, Vietnam was faring well regarding their COVID-19 management. The research sites were far away from any of the high-risk areas, and there were no new community cases occurring in the vicinity during the research period. The RAs were advised to only travel according to the Vietnamese government procedures and were provided with face masks and hand sanitizer. In addition, due to the remoteness of the study sites, at the time of the research, most research participants reported no or minor impacts of COVID-19 on their daily lives.

The use of three RAs to carry out fieldwork with three ethnic minority groups ensured rapid data collection in the uncertain context of the COVID-19 outbreak. Within 4 weeks, the RAs conducted 48 structured in-depth interviews and five focus group discussions with 62 women and 31 men (Tables 1 and 2).

During fieldwork, the RAs recorded interviews with the permission of research participants and transcribed these in Vietnamese before emailing recordings and transcripts to

Phuong for analysis. The RAs were provided with cash to give research participants a small allowance after each interview to compensate them for their time. This aligned with the accepted rate usually offered to those participating in a similar survey or discussion. The RAs usually lodged together during fieldwork, with the costs of their lodgings and travel covered by the research budget. Reflecting on this arrangement, the RAs said this made them more confident as they could support each other when needed. They worked in a team, encouraging each other through group discussions, and joined other interviews when possible, allowing for shared experiences and learning opportunities.

The RAs remained in constant, real-time contact with Phuong via Zalo for updates and continuous support, allowing for problems to be quickly resolved. For example, one RA was frustrated with the brief answers she received when she asked about gender relations such as 'men are the heads of households'. Phuong advised the RA to ask the interviewee what it meant for a man to be the head of a family. Is all property ownership in the man's name? Are only men allowed to represent the family in community meetings or for signing business contracts? Is everything in the family decided by men? The RAs gained skills and knowledge through this real-time, follow-up approach.

Daily Zalo check-ins were also scheduled during fieldwork. The daily check-in helped the research team reflect on progress and discuss emerging issues, enabling Phuong to provide appropriate advice when required. Due to varied arrangements for household interviews and distances travelled, it was hard to schedule group calls. Therefore, check-ins were mainly carried out with one or two RAs at a time, still allowing Phuong to pick up emerging issues quickly, and gain a broader sense of preliminary findings. This helped to ensure a consistent approach across the research, enabling Phuong to advise the RAs to continue interviews or expand the research to other locations. For example, in one case study focused on the empowerment of women tea growers, all the Hmong women interviewed in one commune stated that tea was not their main income source. As the field research is to explore

**Table 2.** Focus Group Discussions (FGD).

Case Study	Ethnicity	FGD	No. of Female Participants	Language Used in FGD
Case study 1	Hmong	1	6	Hmong
	Dao	1	6	Dao
	Tay	1	8	Vietnamese
Case study 2	Hmong	1	5	Vietnamese
	Tay			
	Dao			
Case study 3	Hmong	1	6	Vietnamese
	Dao			
<b>Total</b>		<b>5</b>	<b>31</b>	

how ethnic minority women benefit from their participation in a tea value chain, following discussions with the supervision team, Phuong proposed that the RA interview more Hmong households from another community where tea is the primary income.

To ensure consistency across the RAs' approaches, Phuong shared a daily note to the team via a group chatbox in Zalo. The note compiled the issues faced by the RAs that day and guidance on how they could deal with these issues. It also included lessons, interview techniques, or good tactics implemented by the RAs to build confidence and learn from each other, as indicated in Box 1 below.

**Box 1.** Example of daily note sent to RAs

Pay attention to the interview environment and the people present at the interview. The interviewing environment affects how the household shares sensitive information such as income, financial management, and the tensions between the husband and wife. For instance, one research assistant interviewed the husband and wife when a brother and sister-in-law, a mother-in-law, and an aunt-in-law were present at the meeting. They were hesitant to share information. To address this, change the interview location, as Lien did, so they could more easily share their information.

The interviewees sometimes responded to the interview questions in very general terms. For example, they might answer that everything was discussed and decided by both the husband and wife; or they said whoever had free time would do the housework. In this scenario, ask follow-up questions such as how often the husband shares the housework, and who makes the final decisions. Ask them to give specific examples.

When the interviewees do not remember their incomes from previous years, break the question into more minor queries. This tactic Lien applied seemed to work well, and other RAs can learn and use it for different cases. For example, instead of asking the annual income from tea production, ask how many

times a month they harvested tea, how many months a year, and how many kilograms of tea each harvesting time, and how much it cost for 1 kg of tea.

Many responses from the interviews on day one were that women were the ones who kept money in the family. In this case, the follow-up questions would clarify if this meant women could decide on what to spend the money on. What kind of expenditure could women decide, and what sort of expenditure would they need to ask permission for from their husbands?

### Unanticipated Issues from Working Remotely Through In-Country Research Assistants

Despite the extensive process followed, there were unanticipated issues that arose. Below, six issues are articulated, including explanations of how we embraced these as opportunities and adapted to these challenges.

First, as argued by Turner (2010b), in-depth interviews require researchers to be skillful in prompting and driving the flow of the conversation to focus on the research topics, requiring researchers to observe the attitudes of research participants during interviews and adjust their questions accordingly (Gupta, 2014; Middleton & Cons, 2014; Turner, 2010a). Similar to Deane and Stevano's (2015) experience in Tanzania, Phuong found that in the absence of the researcher, the RAs adopted a 'prescriptive' approach as opposed to an intuitive approach which involves clarifying emerging or unexpected themes. When Phuong listened to the audio recordings and read the RAs' transcripts, she identified areas where the RAs should have asked follow-up questions for further information or clarification. This is understandable, as there had been insufficient time for the RAs to develop in-depth interview skills, especially considering their lack of prior research experience.

In response, Phuong used the daily check-ins to identify the most important issues and themes for the RAs to follow up in

interviews, and adapted the interview question guides when necessary. The initial guide, developed with guidance from her supervisors, was used as a starting point for questions, which the RAs could then expand upon by prompting interviewees according to their responses. However, similar to [Deane and Stevano's \(2015\)](#) structured approach, Phuong quickly realised that the RAs required a more structured format for interview questions that covered the list of leading questions to ask, as well as follow-up questions that would ensure they had covered all important aspects of the research.

While this structured approach was helpful, it led to another challenge: many repetitive questions and answers. The RAs utilised the full list of questions verbatim without taking account of where questions were repeated in various follow-up contexts. Congruent with [Turner \(2010b\)](#), we recommend that the design of comprehensive, yet non-repetitive, interview guidelines, along with thorough training of RAs, is thus crucial for researchers conducting interviews via RAs in remote locations.

Secondly, when conducting remote fieldwork using multiple RAs, the research process and the quality of the data depends on the RAs' commitment, positionality and personalities ([Anwar & Viqar, 2017](#); [Cons, 2014](#); [Temple & Edwards, 2002](#)). In this case, in comparison to when the researcher is present, the RAs took increased control over the fieldwork process, selecting the research participants and deciding how interviews would be conducted, reflecting [Randall et al.'s \(2013, p. 763\)](#) 'power of the interviewer'. The RAs managed the selection process, randomly selecting participants from a list of project beneficiaries and, with assistance from village leaders and project staff, making appointments with selected households. Two of the three RAs followed Phuong's instructions, frequently making contact with her to discuss which research participants they should focus on next (for example, interviewing male or female-only or interviewing both husbands and wives). These RAs also conveyed their concerns when they felt that the quality of the interviews was not rich enough. In comparison, the third RA was more independent, foregoing many of the daily check-ins in her rush to combine her studies and the fieldwork. Additionally, she omitted to discuss participant selection as she went, resulting in more male than female participants interviewed in two of the three case studies, despite women being the primary research target. Information collected from the female focus group discussions surmounted this shortfall.

Similarly, the RAs controlled how interviews were conducted. For example, in one commune, one RA decided that instead of travelling to each household, she selected a convenient location and made appointments with the research participants to meet her there for interviews. She made this arrangement because the research participants' houses were scattered and it would take a long time for her to visit each household and return to her homestay before dark. While contrary to what Phuong would have planned, it demonstrated innovation from the RAs regarding the agreed principle to

adapt fieldwork for their own safety first. This is imperative in research contexts where RAs are young women working in remote areas and should be taken into consideration during the ethics clearance process. Note that this change was in accordance with the approach of the Human Ethics Committee at Massey University, which has strong principles regarding the selection of participants while also allowing researchers flexibility to negotiate fieldwork situations. The change in location for the purpose of the participant and RAs safety and privacy satisfied the ethics requirements for this study.

Third, parallel with [Anwar and Viqar's \(2017\)](#) experience, the RAs' positionality influenced the collection of data more than anticipated. Phuong recruited women RAs from the same ethnic minority groups as those in the case studies, assuming they would share the same language and culture. We expected all interviews to be conducted in ethnic minority languages (Tay, Dao and Hmong) to remove language barriers preventing ethnic minority women from participating in the research. However, each of these ethnic groups has many sub-groups with slightly different languages. Tay has five sub-groups, Hmong has six sub-groups, and Dao has seven sub-groups ([Vietnamese Government Portal, n.d.](#)). The Tay, Dao and Hmong ethnic people of the three cases were from different sub-groups, which were not always the same as those to which the RAs belonged. It was only the Hmong RA who could conduct all interviews in Hmong due to limited language difference across Hmong's sub-groups. The Dao RA could understand 50–60% of the language spoken by participants from other Dao sub-groups, while the Tay RA could understand only 20–30%. Therefore, the Dao and Tay RA sometimes had to seek interpretation support from local women, as indicated in [Tables 1 and 2](#).

The RAs were, therefore, both insiders and outsiders to the research participants ([Cons, 2014](#)). As insiders, they shared the same ethnic minority background and the same language with some of the participants, allowing the RAs to build rapport quickly with these participants, as indicated when the RAs were invited to stay over, share meals or come back to visit.

Simultaneously, the RAs were also outsiders, as they came from different communities, ethnic clans, education levels and, in some cases, language ([Anwar & Viqar, 2017](#); [MacKenzie, 2015](#)). This 'outsider status' was partially overcome through support in the field from local women and project staff who were familiar with the project areas, assisted the RAs to connect with research participants, and provided interpretations in cases where the RAs came from different sub-groups and spoke different languages to the participants.

Fourth, our experience confirmed previous observations that working in cross-language research presents challenges in conveying technical terms and concepts across different languages ([Bujra, 2006](#); [Edwards, 2010](#); [Temple & Edwards, 2002](#)). This is even more complicated in trilingual research when concepts are translated from English to Vietnamese and Vietnamese to the respective ethnic minority languages.

Equivalent terms in these respective languages are not always obvious.

For example, the concept of political empowerment in women's empowerment discourse is challenging to translate directly into Vietnamese. Initially we tried *Nâng cao quyền năng về khía cạnh chính trị*; however, the RAs found this confusing. Additionally, this term was politically sensitive to the local government, which is problematic when working with ethnic minorities in a country like Vietnam. Therefore, we used the term 'participation in critical decision-making processes' in place of 'political empowerment'. Phuong also helped the RAs explain other terms to interviewees by use of examples. When one research assistant could not find an equivalent term in her Dao ethnic language for the Vietnamese term *tự tin* (confidence), Phuong suggested explaining that this term meant women were undertaking business activities or participating in and raising their voices in meetings. In addition, language barriers affected the depth of information that the households could share with the RAs. When Phuong listened to the audio recordings that were in Kinh language (the Vietnamese majority language), she could discern that the households, and particularly female members of those households, had some difficulties understanding the questions or could not elaborate on their answers.

Fifth, supporting previous scholarship, we found that working through different layers of subjectivity also presented a research challenge (Cons, 2014; Gupta, 2014; Middleton & Cons, 2014). When the RAs relied on local women to interpret for participants, the study was subject not only to the 'triple subjectivity' of researcher-RA-participant (Temple & Edwards, 2002), but also a quadruple-subjectivity of researcher-RA-interpretor-participant.

Similar to Bonnin's (2010) findings, the subjectivity of the local women and project staff who supported the RAs also influenced the research process. In one case study, the RAs worked through local women assigned by the business owner. These women acted as gatekeepers, controlling access to research participants. They were not briefed by the researcher and did not fully understand the research requirements, leading to situations where they were unwilling to interpret some questions to interviewees as they thought them unnecessary. For example, in one interview, when the RA tried to ask follow-up questions regarding household financial decision-making processes, the local woman who accompanied the RA asked her not to ask in detail as she felt it was unnecessary and hard for the interviewee to understand.

The RAs' assumptions about what information was important and who should be recruited also affected the data collected, confirming Middleton and Pradhan's (2014) work on the role of RAs' reflexivity in the research process. In one interview with a female head of household, the interviewee mentioned that her daughter-in-law shared the work with her and was the only family member who attended technical training courses. However, the daughter-in-law was not interviewed even though she was at the house when the RA

conducted the interview. If the researcher had been present, she would have been sure to cross-check what the mother said with the daughter-in-law, perhaps on a different occasion when the mother-in-law was not present. The RAs also made subjective decisions about what to transcribe and what to leave out, occasionally choosing not to transcribe an entire record, as they thought some information was not necessary. To ensure information was accurately captured, Phuong checked the recordings while reviewing the transcripts, enabling her to fill any gaps in the Vietnamese interviews. For interviews conducted in ethnic minority languages, Phuong discussed sections from the transcripts where she noted inconsistencies or omissions, and asked RAs to check the recordings if required.

Sixth, consistent with Stevano and Deane (2017), the power dynamics between RAs and participants also affected the research process and data quality. The RAs were younger than most of the people they interviewed or interacted with, presenting some challenges when they interacted with older participants. For example, when one RA met a local government chairwoman to seek support for fieldwork, the chairwoman was not happy about the project and commented that it was not 'effective'. When Phuong asked the RA if she had queried why the chairwoman thought the programme was ineffective, the RA said she did not dare to ask as she was worried that the chairwoman would become angry and stop the fieldwork. Similarly, in household interviews with couples, the RAs were hesitant to interrupt the husband when he dominated the conversation. Similarly, the RAs lacked confidence when navigating situations when the local women assisting with interviews, who were usually older than them, interrupted conversations and influenced interviewees' responses. Fortunately, some of these issues were identified during daily check-ins, and Phuong was able to mentor and coach the younger RAs on how to handle similar situations associated with the sensitivities of power relations.

## Empowerment of Research Assistants

As noted at the beginning of this article, we argue that the approach we developed towards RA-researcher relationships has helped to overcome some of the power hierarchies that often seem implicit between researchers from the global north and local RAs (Gupta, 2014; Hoffman & Tarawalley, 2014; Middleton & Cons, 2014; Sanjek, 1993). We expand on this below, showing how this can both contribute to the personal development of RAs as well as helping to reimagine knowledge production.

Due to the absence of the researcher, the role of the RAs' was more critical than a typical fieldwork relationship. The RAs were relationship-builders, observers, interviewers, translators, and intermediaries (Deane & Stevano, 2015). They coordinated with project staff, local authorities and local women to arrange the fieldwork, select households, and conduct in-depth interviews and focus group discussions without in-person assistance from the researcher. The data



quality depended entirely on how the RAs recruited participants, carried out interviews and focus groups, and interpreted responses. It also depended on their commitment and their perceptions of the depth of information they needed to collect, highlighting the importance of recognising RAs' reflexivity in the research process (Anwar & Viqar, 2017; Cons, 2014; Middleton & Pradhan, 2014).

Due to the specific research approach, the relationship between the researcher and RAs moved beyond an employer–employee contractual relationship (Deane & Stevano, 2015; Molony & Hammett, 2007). Congruent with Bergen's (2018) work, the relationship progressed toward mentoring and empowering the RAs, breaking down power hierarchies and developing more constructive collaborations, reflecting more positive 'ways forward' in development fieldwork (Scheyvens, 2014, p. 253).

Following these principles, empowering young ethnic minority RAs was identified as an objective at the beginning of the fieldwork. Prior to beginning data collection, Phuong discussed with the RAs what they hoped to achieve from the fieldwork for their own skills and experience. As the data collection progressed, anecdotal comments were made by the RAs about how enriching the experience was for them. Specifically, Phuong asked the RAs to review their expectations and reflect on their experience of the research process using Scheyvens (1999)'s empowerment framework, which had guided the questions used in the interviews with the research participants, and which considers changes in four empowerment dimensions: psychological, economic, social and political.

The research team recognised the potential for the RAs' responses to be shaped by the power dynamics between Phuong and them, and to, therefore, give favourable feedback to please Phuong. Phuong acknowledged this relationship and encouraged the RAs to be honest and forthcoming, ensuring them that their responses would have no bearing on the employment relationship. In addition, the RAs' responses were also triangulated with other data, including feedback from people in the communities and discussions during the fieldwork amongst the RAs and Phuong.

In general, the RAs said they had learned a lot from the research process. In addition to earning an income, they built up their confidence and broadened their knowledge about the topic of women's economic empowerment, as well as enhancing their research skills. They stated that their peers admired them for being confident and independent in undertaking the research. They wanted to influence other ethnic minority women, in particular, to be more confident and recognise their vital positions in society.

Specific benefits in terms of psychological empowerment included growth in personal confidence. This could be seen in the motivation levels of the RAs, and their perceptions about self-efficacy:

The research has awakened the ambition of myself and the other two RAs.

(Thao)

I am motivated to participate in development projects such as gender equality after graduating.

(Lien)

Confidence had particularly grown in terms of feeling able to effectively lead research:

I felt more confident when I played the role of an officer to coordinate the fieldwork and carry out the household interviews myself. I saw myself became more mature in thinking and working style. I also felt more confident when I acted as a group facilitator to gather information in an area that I was not familiar with. This experience was a turning point for me to be more mature in future projects.

(Thao)

Economic empowerment was evident, both through the RAs' increased income and through development of competence in transferable work skills:

It was not only about gaining income. Thank you for the opportunity to gain more work experience.

(Lien)

I have learned skills such as in-depth interviews, teamwork, problem-solving skills. The research provided the opportunity for me to apply what I had learned in theory into practice.

(Thao & Lien)

A level of social empowerment was also expressed in comments regarding the RAs as role models. The wider community admired the role played by the RAs, particularly as women working in this space:

My friends and siblings admired me [ngưỡng mộ] for being a girl but daring to carry out the research independently and confidently.

(Thao)

Political empowerment was evident in terms of the RAs wanting to go on to use the knowledge gained through the research to influence and help others:

The research has indeed broadened my knowledge. Specifically to me, since I was a child living in a rural area, I understood the disadvantages women like my mother and grandmother faced. After participating in the research, I understand that women can change their status if their confidence and economic ability are enhanced. If possible, I will bring my valuable skills and knowledge that I have learned from the research to share with women and girls of the same age in my community so they can recognise and value themselves more.

**Table 3.** Summary of Recommendations.

Pre-Fieldwork	
Training RAs	<p>Think carefully about the requirements of RAs during the recruitment phase and develop a clear TOR outlining the purpose of the research, the scope of work, the timeframe</p> <p>Establish a thorough process for training RAs on all aspects of the research, with particular attention to research design, methodology and methods, ethical considerations, and safety issues. Conduct this process in a way that helps to build rapport between the researcher and the RAs and among the RAs themselves</p> <p>Design comprehensive, yet non-repetitive, interview guidelines and work through them with the RAs to make sure they understand leading questions and types of follow-up questions for the research</p> <p>Allow time for RAs to pilot questions and provide feedback to ensure the questions are sensitive to local culture and use appropriate language</p>
<b>During fieldwork</b>	
Research team dynamics	<p>Build a trusting relationship between the researcher and the RAs through regular communication and creating an environment that encourages honest reflections</p> <p>Treat the RAs with respect and show appreciation for their efforts</p> <p>Check on the well-being of RAs in the field (are their lodgings safe and comfortable, is transport adequate, are they ok being away from loved ones for a period of time etc.) and not just on how they are going with the data collection process</p> <p>Support teamwork amongst the RAs so they can work together and support each other during the fieldwork. This helps build their confidence, especially for young and inexperienced female RAs doing research in remote areas</p> <p>Consider ways in which you can allow RAs to have autonomy to actively shape the research to adapt to fieldwork situations e.g. involving their own safety and the safety of their participants</p>
Communication	<p>Select appropriate communication tools and establish regular communications between the researcher and the RAs to ensure a consistent approach across the research, to allow the researcher to identify concerns during the fieldwork and to provide timely guidance to the RAs</p> <p>Provide continuous feedback on the data collection process: feedback should be both positive, to encourage less experienced RAs, and constructive, with tangible ideas on improvements</p>
Community gate keepers	<p>Spend time explaining the research purpose and the research methods to gatekeepers and interpreters in the field so they can support the research process</p>

RA = research assistant.

### (Lien) **Recommendations**

The people I met during the fieldwork were like the people in my community; they had been facing many difficulties. I really want to do something to help them to develop better.

(Thao)

Ultimately, the empowerment of RAs was also associated with opportunities for them to shape the construction of knowledge.

The RAs' growth in confidence and skill during the research process was also evident in the data and comments from interviewees. Later transcripts include richer stories and more in-depth information drawn out through follow-up questions. Towards the end of fieldwork, an interviewee commented that the RA was the best interviewer he had met, because she framed questions clearly and rephrased them when needed. This compliment is evidence of how the RAs developed a range of good interviewing skills over the course of fieldwork. It is also encouraging to note that due to the experience and skills gained from their experience in this study, two of the RAs have recently been offered further research work, which they felt confident accepting.

Based on learnings from this research, our summary of the recommendations for future researchers conducting remote qualitative data collection using RAs is detailed in [Table 3](#).

### **Conclusions**

Doing remote fieldwork using RAs is challenging, particularly with young and inexperienced RAs. This research showed one way this can be done with proper preparation and providing ongoing mentoring and support during fieldwork. This includes developing detailed interview guidelines, providing comprehensive training, checking in regularly with RAs to pick up issues, and providing feedback during fieldwork. This research showed that when adequate support is provided, remote fieldwork can overcome some of the power hierarchies between researchers and RAs. As these RAs came from the same ethnic minority groups as the research participants, they are also the target beneficiaries of the research. They are studying at university and interested in research. They developed their confidence, knowledge and research skills through the research process, and they now know how to use their knowledge to help women and girls in their communities

to recognise their value. The research therefore goes beyond an assumption that recruiting young, inexperienced RAs is a weakness of research, and recognising that it has strengths both for knowledge production and for capacity building of the RAs themselves.

This kind of remote fieldwork using RAs could be used on a larger level going forward to develop research capacity in the global south and to ensure there is greater ownership of the findings of research in the places where it is conducted. It opens up new modes of inquiry for the broader process of knowledge production in social sciences. There could be other advantages to such research too, in terms of cutting down on carbon emissions associated with flying long distance to do field research. Given the power imbalances that have traditionally existed between researchers based in the global north doing development research in the global south, further research should be carried out to examine how remote research using RAs can be used to empower those living in the localities where we seek to collect data.

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### Notes

1. It is also called H'mong or Mông in other documents.
2. It is also called Rao, Yao, or D'ao.

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