

SUMERNET “RESEARCH 4 ALL” PODCAST SERIES  
EPISODE 6 — Research Reflexivity: Dr. Jonathan Rigg  
Full transcript

Rajesh: Welcome everyone to today's episode of research for all our podcast series, looking at research in the Mekong Region. Today, our guest is **Dr. Jonathan Rigg**. He is currently a professor of geography at the University of Bristol in the UK. He has previously worked at the National University of Singapore, London's School of Oriental and African Studies, and the University of Bristol, also in the UK.

Jonathan has been working on matters of agrarian change in mainland Southeast Asia, and beyond, since the early 1980s. This started in Northeast Thailand, however, which is what brings us to invite him to our podcast as well. His work has also branched out other regions of Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam. Welcome Jonathan to this podcast episode.

Jonathan: My pleasure. I'm delighted to join you.

Rajesh: Thank you for joining us. We wanted to explore with you today in our episode matters relating to reflexivity in research in the Mekong region. Our researchers in their work engage with a range of culturally, socially and ecologically different situations, especially with local actors, and, as we know, in research. Local actors play a crucial role in the research process. The research is often shaped and influenced by the situations as well as these actors.

To start with, what are some of your insights and reflections on these intersections and disconnections between research methods, approaches, and theories and the changing world out there?

Jonathan: Well, um big question. Thinking back over my research career, which scarily is now 40 years long so i'm getting pretty long in the tooth. I think there are probably three areas or facets of change to consider when we think about the links between methods and theories in our research to the world, both real and imagined and I think in an odd sort of way, approach isn't a really appropriate word so how do we come into contact, physically, emotionally, and intellectually with the world that we are seeking to understand.

And with that challenge in mind what is changing, and I think there are kind of three things that are changing. First and self-evidently, the world is changing. In 1982, when I started my Ph. D. Research in two villages in in Mahasarakham province in northeast Thailand, I treated the village almost as a world onto itself. I mean, that's a word that Elsie uses in his 1997s book, the end of a peasantry in Southeast Asia. In 2022, it makes little sense to treat the village in such a manner, and maybe it was even questionable back in 1982 when I started.

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Second, the intellectual environment and the theories that inform our work and my work have changed. In the early to mid 80s, the arguments that were sort of shaping my ideas were derived from books such as Michael Lipton's *White Poor people*, staple urban bias in *World Development*, which was published in 1977, Robert Chambers' *Rural Development*, published in 1983 and Paul Richards' *Indigenous Agricultural Revolution*, which was published in 1985. So those are the books that I was reading and learning from, and I sort of took those ideas into the field, if you like. When I was analyzing my results, I was using those ideas as a framing or schema for thinking about what I was trying to understand.

In the third area of changes is that we changed. In 1982, I was twenty-three years old, and I was a neophyte. I was new to independent scholarship. I had never worked in Thailand. I was new new to rural research. I was, if you like, an innocent abroad, and that, to be honest shows in my thesis. I mean. I think if you read the thesis, what comes through sort of between the lines is someone who's finding their way. I was an apprentice in rural research. So all these facets have changed influence even determine the questions that we ask, and equally important, those that we choose and I think this is really key not to ask the methods we use, the data we collect and the assumptions that are built into our research why is it the some data considered valid and valuable, while other forms of data and information are discounted with regard to methods.

For example, in 1982, I treated the household as a unit of analysis, and I interviewed heads of household, mostly men as interlocutors of, and four their broader household. I didn't pay attention to the divisions and frictions within their household, be they gendered or generational. So when I think back, I mean just sort of reflective overall on your question when I think back over 40 years.

Jonathan Rigg: It's a different world. It's a different intellectual context, and I of course I am a lot older. I'm not sure if i'm wiser. But I am older, and the experience of the last forty years has changed. What I do, how I do it, what I count, what I don't count, and so on.

Rajesh: Thank you, Jonathan. That was brilliant. It's quite both staggering and also inspiring the body of research you have [done], and the experiences that you have collected. And of course this matters to us because you're also reflecting on this period of research and your work in itself. Let me go then to this issue of reflexivity, which is what we would like to focus on today. We think of research as a dialogue, a dialogue of knowledge, and because now we know that the researcher is not the sole medium or interpreter of this knowledge and information. Other actors, especially as you have said, in when you visit local areas they are often critical to this knowledge production,

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You noted that you also have ah have been influenced, and the questions you ask or not to ask, which is the methodological choice is being made what people are placed, privileged or which are discarded. Even your choice of households, or who leads the household? Can you tell us from your own experiences on these choices that were made or not made, and their influence on knowledge production?

Jonathan: Yes, I'm sort of trying to think of all the examples which ones to pick but I mean i'll pick two as a way of trying to address and eliminate that interesting question. A significant part of my Ph. D. Research was on rice variety, selection, strategy in Northeast Thailand, which is a highly marginal environment, marginal to the production and the cultivation of wet rice. I identified a context where semi-subsistence farmers were juggling risk and reward in a really capricious environmental context. They had no savings to speak of. There's no bank accounts. The State was unlikely to step in and choose a household face a subsistence crisis,

With that in mind, life and livelihoods revolved around, ensuring that sufficient rice was grown and harvested to meet the needs of the family every year. There was no scope for a year of relative failure and then a year of abundance.

Well thinking about it, there's another book that influenced me at the time was Jim Scott's *The moral economy of the Peasant*, published in 1976. I imagine a lot of your listeners have read that. I mean remarkable book. He has got an extraordinary number of books that he's written by. That was the one that I read leading up to my Phd work but even the moral economy of the peasant was fraying under the pressures of market integration in Mahasarakham [province in northeast Thailand].

So farmers were growing traditional and intermediate rice varieties suited to the very particular conditions found in each individual paddy field. Farmers often owned upper paddy land susceptible to drought, lower paddy lands susceptible to floods and the middle paddy land, which lay between the two. These fields were often contiguous, so that farmers could manage water availability across these different agroecosystems and the varieties of planted on the upper paddies were quick maturing, short stemmed, drought resistant on the lower fields. They tend to be longer maturing, tall, and flood-resistant. I came away from the research thinking that I just didn't see how generalized modern varieties, such as those of the Green Revolution, would be suitable in such a finely tuned context, where it seemed that farmers in the environment had an extraordinary intersection between those social, physical or natural contexts.

Jonathan: So the the government at the time was trying to encourage farmers to grow modern varieties, and I thought that this was misguided because it didn't take account of this extraordinary way in which farmers were engaging with the environment, and then I returned to, and I read a series

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of papers, sort of arguing that, and then I returned to the villages a few years later, and I found that almost every farmer was planting modern varieties released by the rice division, and I kind of thought what happened here? Why have I got this so wrong? And I suppose that was sort of humbling experience. It was a set of mythological questions which I then thought about. What was it that I was doing that led me to misconstrue or misunderstand? Certainly, miss the direction of travel.

The second example comes from Nepal, which I know is outside your field of sort of geographical field of interest, but hopefully this will nonetheless resonate. So I've worked in Nepal on a series of large interdisciplinary grants, covering the natural and the social scientists and sciences, looking at earthquake resilience, and the risks of secondary hazards, such as landslides,

A prior PhD Student of mine, some of Katie Oven, who is now in Northumbria University in the UK expected these threats. So earthquakes, landslides, glacial lake, outburst floods that they would be uppermost in people's minds and she went into the field, expecting to find this. But in fact, what she found was that everyday risks related to health, education, livelihoods were the the ones that really worried villages and shaped their decisions.

People were moving from relatively safe off-road locations to live by the roadside, where they were at risk of landslides and a large number of people in Nepal are killed and injured by landslides every year, and the reasons for this fairly obvious why they were moving. The roadside provides access to schools, markets, work, health facilities, other amenities. They were trading increased landside risks for access to these things and therefore our focus on one particular risk, I think, obscure the complex bricolage of risk that people encountered, and against which they were making their decisions.

In each instance in Northeast Thailand and in Nepal. I need some jettison, some quietly, quite firmly held convictions and notions of not just what I would find but and I think this is more important. But what I should find, and so both of those examples sort of make me think right. We we not only have to question what we do and why we hold the convictions and views that we do, but also how we, how we test them, and how we come to our conclusions. And across very different quests: one in Northeast Thailand and one in Nepal, I think they are telling us a similar sort of story.

Rajesh Daniel: Fascinating. I think the thing that I would follow up on that is somehow, also the constraints that researchers face. For example, you didn't mention grants, for example. Sometimes it's a particular project that is already there that has decided to work, and you join the project. Sometimes the researcher alone has not decided those methods, because it has already been decided for her or him. Have you ever encountered that situation? or if not any insight into that kind of larger constraints that come upon the researcher and then how do they grab it?

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Jonathan: I think some project-based research does get constrained by the project framework that is determined from day one. But you know a project is funded because it's going to do A, B and C, and then, of course you get into the field, and you think well, A doesn't apply but B is different. And what is about x, y and Z? And so I think that sometimes particularly large projects are rather cumbersome and you know they don't have that flexibility which the independent researcher, when it can go into the field and adjust and adapt and iterate over time. So I think large projects do face that challenge. So how do you adjust and adapt in the light of what you find, what you don't find.

But then I think the advantage of large projects, and this particularly true for early-career researchers is, of course you're working with others. You're sitting down. You're talking to them. You're learning, and I think that's really important especially when projects are interdisciplinary. And I mean by that deeply interdisciplinary, and not shallow illing.

So I mean often people talk about interdisciplinarity, and actually they're talking about it in a rather sort of shallow or narrow way as inter interdisciplinarity between human geographers, political scientists and anthropologists. I think that what's really interesting and challenging is when you have geologists and Earth scientists and computer programmers working with anthropologists and human geographers, and so forth. And that's much harder. If it works well, really, you know, be interesting and productive.

So I think how we bring projects together, how we ensure that large projects involving many people and many millions of US dollars, how do we ensure that they they do evolve in terms of what they're doing and what their objectives are over time, and they don't kind of get stuck in a rut, and I think that's a real danger, particularly with large projects, and when you have funding bodies who are checking achievements against what was set out in the original sort of project proposal.

Rajesh: The interesting case studies of Nepal and Thailand you've shown that these field encoders are also critical, not only in shaping your or knowledge production, but it seems to have and to reflect more on how you made those choices. And it seems that would be the case. we think that researchers should reflect more on how their encounters, especially in the local context with local actors are influencing the process of a knowledge construction.

Rajesh: Overall, from your experience in social sciences research, would you say there is much reflexivity, and the research is interactions with, as you said, the world out there?

Jonathan: Yes, there is, and increasingly so. I mean with my Phd. In the first few that I supervised. I don't recall part of the methods discussion, getting people to reflect on their positionality, and so on and so forth. But I mean everyone does that now as a matter of course in the social sciences, so I

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suppose it's become sort of mainstream automatic, you know, expected but thinking about sort of my own experiences. I'm going to give an example of this of the contact between researchers, researcher interactions with the world, with their respondents. So when I started researching in Laos, I worked on a project. So this was in the late 1990s on a project with the National Agricultural and Forestry Research Institute (NAFRI), and we were examining land-use change in villages outside of London, in the north of Laos.

As part of the project, we undertook a participatory mapping exercise to try and get a sense of how land was used and valued in pin settlements, and this became a largely male exercise as men took up the marker pens, imposed their views and values on the map that emerged. So women sat at the back of the room. They didn't really involve themselves in the process. The map, therefore, and as a result emphasized forests for hunting rather than for the collection of other non-tember forest products for cash rather than subsistence.

And afterwards I mean that was we we didn't expect it to happen like maybe we should have thought more deeply about it. You know how. How would a participant mapping exercise? Yeah, emerge in a context such as a village in Northern Laos. But we kind of sat there and saw this map emerged, which was driven by men, and their interests and concerns and knowledge and sort of women unintentionally became sidelined in the process. And of course there are scholars have written about this, and the one who springs to mind is the anthropologist, David Moss, who has shown how information derived from participatory research always emerges from a social context where some people have more power than others, they can set the terms of the debate, and of course, expressions like participate exclusion. The lead capture emphasize the dangers of assuming that the village is a community without division.

So how we encounter the village and engage with villagers, has to enter a social field where there is inequality, division, and gradations of status women. The young in migrants, the poor minorities. All these groups have to be actively sort out. They're not going to emerge and engage with us unbidden, so we can't just sort of turn up and think that everything will work out fine, that people will tell us what they're thinking, that who talks to us what they say, and don't say how they engage with each other as they're talking to us, and of course, how they engage with us will be shaped and influenced by those sorts of divisions, in inequalities, gradations of status, of power and authority, and so on and so forth. And I think there's a dangerous innocence sometimes in assuming that the you know things will just work out if we are sufficiently friendly and open, and apparently participatory. And I suppose that example from Laos is a sort of obvious example of when you know these things do not work out as as we hope, and of course we collect. Well, we forge a partial view of the context which we're seeking to understand, and what we can do is reproduce the inequalities that we're always there and reproduce the knowledge inequalities that but always there.

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Rajesh: I guess the the issue with this is when we have taken views and values that are there, or that are partial, and we're reproducing them. They sometimes can have real world consequences. Your research can then be translated into other things officially maybe the border was demarcated for for hunting rather than NTFP [non-timber forest products] and so on. Can you reflect a bit on that? The the reflexivity of research? But also how can researchers be more aware of these consequences of their research in the real world?

Jonathan: I I've always worked in sort of university context, and something which is,I regret in many ways is that I haven't had the opportunity to work. I feel like, at the sharp end of things, and actually ask questions. Well, how does this? How should we translate this into policy? What policies will have traction in the context that we're seeking to understand. How can we improve productivity, equality, livelihoods, well-being or whatever it is. And I suppose partly because of there are many occasions when I've got things wrong. I've always been sort of wary of using my research directly to inform and design policy. Maybe i'm a kind of coward in that respect, and maybe I should grasp the nettle and say right. What does this mean for policy? But I'm also conscious that but because of this process of reflecting on where I've gone wrong, I this sort of thing. Wow! Well, what would that have meant if someone actually had taken my word for it and design policy against these views.

We're extraordinarily fortunate in the academic world in being able to do our own research independently, and write, you know papers and articles, and give lectures, and not have to think well, what is about the policies. I mean well, i'm getting, as I said, to right at the start, rather long in the two, so maybe it's too late. I would like to engage with policy more directly, and I suppose to be put on the spot to say right. If you think that, how do we promote just rural development? How how do we engage with climate change, adaptation in a context like Northern Laos or Northeast Thailand, or wherever it happens to be. There is something several that I haven't really done, and maybe I should have done.

Rajesh Daniel: Thank you. I'm sure there are many more years and you Jonathan for research. Don't worry about that. We'll get there.

Given what we've talked about, how look like this constantly shaping or seeking to shape the knowledge produced, and our own reflections on what we value, what we view and what we choose to include or exclude. What are your insights on designing this kind of research where you're already planning to allow for interactive reflections on the part of the researchers and the local context or the local actors? Especially, we have many younger researchers coming up. This advice would be useful for them.

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Jonathan: This speaks back to some of my contact, my comments about participatory exclusions, and so forth. And um the fantastic work that comes out I mean particularly, I think, of South Asia on on these issues. I mean. It also reminds me a little bit of a question that I put to the political scientist, Meredith Vice and the historian, Sonal Amrit, a few years ago, so I was director of the Asia Research Institute at the National University of Singapore, and every year we ran a kind of early career Researcher workshop people would come in from across the region and across the world for several weeks, and we end with this conference, and sort of Meredith and Sunnil. I asked them to come up with a set of hot tips for early career researchers, you know, if you're going to revise young scholars and researchers. What would you say? And I mean, I haven't taken them completely, but I've kind of looked back at what they said, and I've come up with kind of five hot tips for early-career researchers.

First of all, I think it's important to read, I can never get enough of reading, I mean every time when in fact, i'm looking at my bookshelves here, and I've got sort of school of books, and i'm always buying new books to the chagra of my wife. But anyway, important to read, but it's also important, I think, not to be led by what you have read and learn. So led by which I mean led in a manner where you're taking everything at face value, I think we need to continually question what we've read and read widely. So don't just read the books that re-emphasize, or what you already think. Read books that are going to challenge you. Read books that are going to annoy you and you're going to think. No, it's not like that, because I think that's important.

Secondly, I think we've got to be willing to change our views over time and be pleased to change our views, I think being wrong in many senses is more productive than being right. Thinking back at those moments which at the time were disappointing, and I thought, you know I've got that wrong. It's not what I thought. But on reflection, those have then taken my ideas and my writing in a new direction, so I think, being willing to change and being happy to change our views. To be shown to be wrong is really important.

Thirdly, I think it's important to cultivate connections, to be social, to listen, to reflect, to learn. I mean, we're obviously social creatures. Even the lone scholar is sitting in her or his room. Writing books is a social creature, so we sort of getting out there, and you talking to others learning from them is important. Thinking about this in the light of Covid-19, being there in the field is really important. I haven't until this year. I didn't go back to Southeast Asia for two years, and I came to realize that actually going back, sitting in a village surrounded by rice fields, or whatever talking to people, you cannot replicate that through social media and zoom and teams, all that kind of stuff, and if you're going to recalibrate your ideas in the way that i'm just saying to see whether you're right or wrong, I think it is required us to being there. So cultivate connections, both, in academia I'm an academic, but also in the places that we're seeking to understand.



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Fourth, I think it's important to be strategic, by which I mean that you can't do everything. So you've got to be clear about what you're doing, and why, and I think it's all too easy either to be driven, or to cast your net too widely. Now I can see that perhaps people are thinking hit Jonathan is kind of contradicting himself. He's saying, be informed or not led by what you've read and learn when he's saying, don't cast your net too widely and keep it under control. I think there's a productive tension between the two. But I see with my Phd students that there's a moment, they arrive to do their PhDs and they're very clear about what they're going to do. Then they start to read, and it kind of starts getting wider and wider and wider, and then normally about nine months in. I say, now you've got to circle the wagons. Now you've got to decide what you are actually doing, because it's impossible. All of the things that you and then you sort of start to narrow down, and I think that's what I mean by being strategic.

Finally, I think you've got to have the confidence to try out your ideas with others or I suppose best still sort of cultivate a mentor, someone that you can trust and talk to. I think we need to be willing. Well, I've said earlier, willing to be shown to be wrong. But the way to do that, is to sit down and and give talks to people on the right things, circulate them, and I sometimes think we're increasingly less willing to to share ideas. Sometimes I think we sort of keep them close to us. I'm not quite sure why, whether it's defensive or protective, and I think it's really important to talk, to share and to engage. And I think that's that's mutually beneficial for all of us. Not just for the person who's doing the talking, but also, of course, the person who's listening. So those are my five hot tips for early-career researchers.

Rajesh: Thank you. That is wonderful, indeed. These are extremely useful for especially younger researchers Jonathan, but that we would like to wrap up unless you have anything that you wanted to emphasize, or you think you have forgotten, and you'd like to come back to reiterate.

Jonathan: I sort of give lectures and talks on topics the green revolution or livelihoods research, or whatever it is. So it's quite nice to be able to think more broadly about: wow! Why did I do that? Why did I treat the village as a unit of analysis? Why did I think that somehow going into Ban Non Daeng ... would somehow [help] ... why did I think that those villages were representative of some bigger set of questions? And I think often we do. Maybe you give me the opportunity to kind of wrap things up in one. I think that English expression that you lose sight of the wood for the trees is a real danger. When you do ethnographic, field-based, detailed research with households and villages, that you get really into the nooks and crannies of what's going on in people's lives, and occasionally we just need to leave a village, take a step back, see the bigger picture, ask those bigger questions, and you've given me an opportunity to do that today. So thank you Rajesh.

Rajesh: Thank you, Jonathan.