



Moving Beyond
Solidarity Rhetoric
in Global Health

Thoughts on POWER and Global Health Research Ethics

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Initial considerations

- The pitfalls of Ethics Conferences
 - Ethical buzzwording
 - Reverse Global Health troping
 - Ethical blame-shifting
- *Ab exterioribus ad interiora*
 - the movement from procedural ethics to **reflexive moral consciousness**, aligning outward power with inward integrity and compassion.

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Health Research: what is all about?

- Health research is about generating new knowledge that improves health, healthcare, and quality of life.
 - This is where the problems begin
 - Knowledge: what, how, and who?
 - Improves health.... who and how?
- Health research is about generating power (epistemic in the first instance), and is done by people living and working in relationships that are enlaced with power, who operate within structures, institutions that are defined by power.
- Power is a common thread in global health research.

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A conception of Power

- **Power** can be defined in several ways depending on the context, but generally, it refers to the **ability or capacity to influence, control, or direct the behavior of others or the course of events.**
- From this viewpoint, power requires **conscious intent** — the ability to make deliberate choices or decisions.
 - Power is not energy or force
 - We can attribute power to non-humans (Latour-actants) if we consider power as simply the capacity to affect change or influence outcomes, not necessarily as the intention to do so.
- If we stay with the conception of power as requiring conscious intent, then the exercise of power becomes an **ethical** concern.

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Power imbalance

- Power imbalance is not inherently negative; rather, it is an inevitable feature of social, political, and institutional relationships.
- In some contexts, some degree of asymmetry is necessary for coordination, expertise, and protection.
- The issue lies not in the existence of unequal power but in how it is **acquired, exercised and justified**.
- Power imbalance becomes ethically problematic when it leads to domination, silencing, or exclusion.

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Institutionalized Power

- Power becomes **institutionalized** when it is embedded within the bureaucratic, financial, and epistemic structures that organize health research governance.
 - Rather than residing in individuals, power circulates through institutions, policies, and technologies that define what counts as legitimate knowledge and which populations are prioritized.
- Institutionalized power becomes **anonymous**, enacted through data infrastructures, algorithms, and funding models that appear neutral yet embody particular political and moral assumptions.
 - In this way, power functions less as domination and more as **governmentality**—a dispersed and technocratic form of control that shapes conduct while concealing its own authority.
- Institutionalized and anonymous power in global health naturalizes inequality by framing political choices as objective technical necessities. Together, they create **a form of power that is stable, invisible, and difficult to challenge — precisely because it feels normal, objective, and no one seems to own it.**

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Power and Moral Capacity

- When moral capacity is not proportional to power, **influence exceeds ethical responsibility**, creating conditions for harm and injustice.
 - Those who possess great power—whether individuals, institutions, or systems—can act decisively without adequate reflection on the moral implications of their actions.
- Moral awareness should expand alongside technological and institutional power; otherwise, **decision-makers risk moral blindness**—producing harm not necessarily through malice, but through detachment.
- The ethical challenge, therefore, is to cultivate **moral imagination and accountability equal to our capacity to act**, ensuring that global health power is guided by empathy, humility, and justice rather than efficiency alone.

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Ethical Reflexivity

- **Ethical self-reflexivity** refers to the ongoing practice of critically examining one's own values, assumptions, and position of power within moral and professional decision-making.
- It involves more than applying ethical principles; it requires questioning the frameworks and privileges that shape one's sense of what is right or just.
- By cultivating humility, openness to critique, and sensitivity to context, **practitioners can recognize how their actions both reflect and reproduce broader social structures.**
 - This process transforms ethics from a set of external rules into a continuous, relational practice of responsibility.
- Ultimately, ethical self-reflexivity seeks **not certainty, but moral maturity**—the capacity to act with integrity while remaining alert to the limits of one's own perspective and the impact of one's power.

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Concluding Thoughts from Romano Guardini

- Power is a responsibility that must be shaped by moral insight.
- When human power grows without corresponding ethical depth, it becomes dehumanizing and dangerous.
- True mastery is not domination over nature or others, but **mastery over one's own power.**

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