Tackling helicopter research

A new ethics framework urges researchers to promote greater equity in global collaborations.

Geoscience is a global exercise, from sampling and fieldwork in remote locations to international collaborations. Helicopter research — also referred to as 'parachute science' — is when researchers from higher-income or more privileged settings carry out research in resource-poor settings with limited to no involvement of local communities or researchers[1]. It can occur at any point from the conceptualization of a project to its eventual publication. Such practices perpetuate historical imbalances of power, can be exploitative, and are bad for science.

Nature Portfolio journals already support collaboration with local researchers and expect the inclusion of local collaborators as co-authors when appropriate.

Nature Geoscience and other Nature Portfolio journals are now also encouraging authors to follow the recommendations of the Global Code of Conduct for Research in Resource-Poor Settings in the design, execution, and reporting of research. The guidance encourages authors to provide a disclosure statement in their manuscript that considers a list of questions. These questions include whether the research has included local researchers throughout the research process, whether the research is locally relevant, and whether local and regional research has been appropriately cited. The guidance also challenges editors to ensure that relevant communities are represented in the peer review process.

The disclosure statement is shared with reviewers and will appear in the published paper as an 'Ethics & Inclusion Statement'. Although we are not requiring a disclosure statement for all papers at this time, we hope authors will not only follow the guidance, but also carry forward the values represented into future research endeavours.

The new guidance complements existing ethics policies on sample collection and reporting where authors are asked to declare that samples have been collected responsibly and legally with sufficiently detailed information reported. However, we recognize that ethical sampling and providing provenance information does not necessarily ensure the inclusion of local knowledge and expertise[2]. And inclusion alone does not ensure that there are no helicopters, parachutes, or colonialism to contend with[3].

Our recent policy update is just a small step towards making global geoscience research more inclusive, equitable, and ethical. Tackling helicopter science will require more than a push by journals to consider these issues, which can be embedded from the earliest initiation of a research project. Conscious efforts will be needed from all stakeholders, including institutions, funders, publishers, and individual researchers. ❐

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