



Morals, morale and motivations in data fabrication: Medical research fieldworkers views and practices in two Sub-Saharan African contexts



Patricia Kingori ^{a,*}, René Gerrets ^b

^a The Ethox Centre, Nuffield Department of Population Health, University of Oxford, Old Road Campus, Oxford OX27LP, United Kingdom

^b Department of Anthropology, University of Amsterdam, Nieuwe Achtergracht 166, 1018WV Amsterdam, Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

Data fabrication, incorrect collection strategies and poor data management, are considered detrimental to high-quality scientific research. While poor data management have been occasionally excused, fabrication constitutes a cardinal sin – scientific misconduct. Scholarly examinations of fabrication usually seek to expose and capture its prevalence and, less frequently, its consequences and causes. Most accounts centre on high-income countries, individual senior researchers and scientists who are portrayed as irrational, immoral or deceptive.

We argue that such accounts contain limitations in overlooking data collected in ‘the field’, in low-income countries, by junior researchers and non-scientists. Furthermore, the processes and motivations for fabrication and subversive practices are under-examined. Drawing on two separate ethnographies, conducted in 2004–2009 in medical research projects in sub-Saharan Africa, this paper investigates fabrication among fieldworkers using data from observations and informal conversations, 68 interviews and 7 Focus Group Discussions involving diverse stakeholders. Based on an interpretative approach, we examined fieldworkers’ accounts that fabrications were motivated by irreconcilable moral concerns, faltering morale resulting from poor management, and inadequate institutional support. To fieldworkers, data fabrication constituted a ‘tool’ for managing their quotidian challenges. Fabrications ranged from active to passive acts, to subvert, resist and readdress tensions deriving from employment inequalities and challenging socio-economic conditions.

We show that geographical and hierarchical distance between high-ranking research actors and fieldworkers in contemporary configurations of international medical research can compartmentalise, and ultimately undermine, the relationships necessary to produce high-quality data. In focusing on fieldworkers, we argue for the inclusion of wide-ranging perspectives in examinations of data fabrication.

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1. Introduction

I am always surprised that people would take that chance [of fabricating data], and yet they [fieldworkers] keep doing it! Maybe you should talk to some of those people and find out what the motive could have been. (Laughter) Because it's true... we always say... why would you take the chance to lose a job, when you know it's so hard to get a job? But it happens. Why go through this process of being one of... hundreds of people to get this job, knowing what the [employment/economic] situation

out there is like, knowing the sort of stand that we take about these things – to then falsify the data?

(Eve*, Senior expatriate researcher, In-depth interview, STUDY A)

Data fabrication remains a consistent feature of medical research, and yet, as the senior researcher quoted above points out, its motivations are generally poorly documented. Examinations of data fabrication predominantly derive from high-level researchers and bench scientists in wealthy countries (Mojon-Azzi and Mojon, 2004; Sovacool, 2008). Consequently, our understanding of fabrication barely considers the masses of ‘invisible’ fieldworkers, technicians, students and other ‘hired hands’ involved in quotidian aspects of research work (Roth, 1966; Shapin, 1989; Timmermans

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: Patricia.kingori@ethox.ox.ac.uk (P. Kingori).

and McKay, 2009). Moreover, studies of fabrication rarely involve low-income settings in the global South (Ana et al., 2013; Fanelli, 2009; Okonta and Rossouw, 2014), where a considerable proportion of medical research takes place (Petryna, 2009).

This paper addresses these oversights by examining fieldworkers' motivations in fabricating data in two contemporary Sub-Saharan African research settings. It addresses why, how and when data was fabricated; not the impact of data fabrications on research more broadly. This paper argues that fabrication, from fieldworkers' perspectives, was motivated by moral and morale factors. These factors included: difficulties in reconciling physical, economic and contextual challenges emerging during community-based work with their expected roles; resistance against perceived unrealistic work-loads; discontentment with employment terms and conditions; insufficient institutional support; and management weaknesses.

1.1. *The inexplicable act: why and by whom is data fabricated?*

Data fabrication (inventing data or cases), along with falsification (distorting data or findings) and plagiarism (failure to attribute copied words, ideas or data), are frequently defined as scientific misconduct that share a hallmark feature: the intention to manipulate research outputs (Fanelli, 2009; Franzen et al., 2007). This intentionality is important in distinguishing scientific misconduct from questionable research practices (QRP), which are unintentional deviations, for instance through error or negligence (Steneck, 2006). A recent study reported that almost a quarter of research scientists admitted to intentionally fabricating or falsifying data during their career, while nearly three-quarters engaged in QRP (Ana et al., 2013). Like many other studies, little attention was paid to possible motivations.

Studies on data fabrication in medical research often speculate about its possible motivations. In public and scholarly discussions, data fabrications is commonly framed as an inexplicable act. For instance in April 2013 in the first case of a UK scientist being imprisoned for fabrication, the sentencing judge remarked to Dr. Steven Eaton: “*Why someone...as highly educated and as experienced as you would embark on such a course of conduct is inexplicable*” (BBC News, 2013). The judge's comments point at two further biases in the literature: discussions of fabrications typically focus on acts by high-ranking researchers; the context that shapes the motivations and behaviour of these individuals often gets less attention (Franzen et al., 2007). When contextual issues are discussed, for instance the pressure to publish, how institutions might intentionally or unintentionally foster fabrications is seldom researched in detail (Pryor et al., 2007). Collectively, such biases have skewed accounts of who undertakes fabrication and why it occurs.

1.2. *Motivations for data fabrication among field-level research actors*

Almost seventy years ago, in his account of fabrications among demographers, Crespi (1946) distinguished between *moral* conceptions of fabrication, which framed explanations at individual-level, and *morale*, which had institutional implications. Following Crespi's distinction, data fabrication is not necessarily undertaken by immoral individuals, a common perspective in the medical literature, but can also be undertaken for moral reasons by demoralised employees such as fieldworkers lacking institutional support. Thus, exploring morale can illuminate institutional and social conditions that enable and foster fabrication (de Sardan, 1999).

Sociologist Roth, in an early study investigating the institutional and social conditions underlying data fabrication (1966), traces how ‘hired hands’ shape data collection in various American

contexts:

After it became obvious how tedious it was to write down numbers on pieces of paper which didn't even fulfil one's own sense of reality and which did not remind one of the goals of the project, we all in little ways started avoiding our work and cheating on the project. It began innocently enough, but soon boomeranged into a full cheating syndrome, where we would fake observations for some time slot which were never observed on the ward.

[...] Even those who start out with the notion that this is an important piece of work which they must do right will succumb...when they realize that their suggestions and criticisms are ignored...that they will receive no credit for the final product, in short, that they have been hired to do somebody else's dirty work. They will cut corners to save time and energy. They will fake parts of their reporting. They will not put themselves out for something in which they have no stake except in so far as extrinsic pressures force them to.

(Roth, 1966, pp. 190–192)

Despite its focus on an American setting, an enduring value of Roth's work is in foregrounding the consequences of a Fordist knowledge production model (Beynon and Nichols, 2006), which compartmentalises research projects and reproduces a hierarchical division of labour, with negative effects on fieldworker morale. Such compartmentalisation and divisions of labour are now commonplace and permeates countless institutions; biomedical research in sub-Saharan Africa is no exception.

Almost fifty years later, first-hand fieldworker insights are rarely discussed; however, a small but significant body of work, dispersed across numerous disciplines and contexts, has sought to provide contemporary accounts of fieldworker data fabrication. For instance, Biruk (2012) presents valuable ethnographic insights on fieldworker data fabrication in a resource-poor Malawian context, although institutional influences on fieldworker fabrications received limited attention.

A study that specifically examines institutional influences in data fabrication, within a community-based drug-use intervention in a low-income setting in Philadelphia, notes that perceived “procedural injustice in the research enterprise itself... may in turn contribute to misbehaviors in research” (True et al., 2011: 4). With a quarter of participating fieldworkers disclosing fabrication on moral grounds, and half knowing of a colleague who fabricated data, but not disclosing this to superiors, True et al. highlight the relevance of context-specific dynamics and collective action in shaping data fabrication (2011:4–5). This reinforces de Vries et al.'s (2006:44–45) argument that focusing on a single “bad apple” obscures complicity, institutional environments and research contexts that produce or endorse fabrications – a ‘bad barrel.’ Additional work by these authors directly implicates institutional policies and lack of support in fieldworkers' moral distress during data collection (Fisher et al., 2013). While many of these examinations occur in the global North, they challenge ideas that data fabrication is exceptional and underscore the need for investigations of its social and institutional underpinnings.

1.3. *Genuine fakes*

Science and Technology Studies (STS) scholars have long argued scientific data are socially constructed, shaped by wider sociocultural, political and economic forces, and different actors' motivations (Latour et al., 1986). This literature emphasises the inherent

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