

IHRM Webinar #18 – Questioning Elitism in IHRM Studies – Chris Brewster

Questions and comments from attendees

I appreciate all the kind comments and the engagement of people (including several friends of mine!) with the presentation. I cannot respond to everything but I hope that the following might help to keep the conversation going.

There were a few comments pointing out that I had sadly ignored some of the good work that is being done that makes my critique of the field too crude. I entirely accept that: as I said at the beginning, in order to get through it in time, I had to generalise wildly (and I apologise to everyone whose work I couldn't cover). There are, I believe, steps being taken to overcome some of the elitism of our field and I applaud them all and want to move us further in that direction.

Several of the comments referred to the problem of what one questioner called the 'gatekeepers': the funders of our research – the elite states or often the elite companies, looking for a return on their investment that will benefit themselves – and the journal editors and reviewers. It was pointed out that most journals are based in the WEIRD states and the editors and reviewers (us!) are themselves elites, so it is not surprising that they are themselves interested in elites. Part of this may be the journals increasing reliance on publishing statistically powerful papers – it is hard, for example, to get statistically strong data from developing societies and from informal workers anywhere. Part of this may be a function of the ever-increasing number of journal submissions: journals are now becoming more reliant on inexperienced associate editors and reviewer who cover for their inexperience by 'following the rules' punctiliously; it is the more senior scholars who feel confident enough to be more open-minded. I am happy to recognise that there are editors out there who fit the 'open-minded' requirement and that things may be moving, slowly, in a more positive direction.

It was also pointed out that because trying to publish research on non-elites is relatively new, there is not an established body of literature for us to refer to – and that makes editors and reviewers nervous. Quite right, of course – and that gives us our challenge! We have to build up the numbers of publications: it can be done – there are some examples at the end of my PPTs, and with due deference to the colleagues who did most of the work on those papers, it should not be hard to improve on them ...

There was reference to the problems of researching IHRM in SMEs, in developing societies and in the public and third sectors. As I said, it is not that there is no research on these topics, but there is very little in our field – some we can bring across from these other disciplines and some we will have to research ourselves. There are some excellent examples of IHRM work in each of these areas, and I was happy to read about, as examples, unresearched cases of successful African MNEs. Of course, many of our academic colleagues in the developing countries are

themselves elites. My own view is that it is important that researchers in these contexts do ‘emic’ research and not ‘etic’ research: ie that they find out how people are actually managed in and across these settings and don’t just apply WEIRD models to them. There is a vast number of potential issues here and a huge research agenda for anyone interested. On the other side, I would like to see some balance – I get worried for example, by papers that examine *guanxi* and its equivalents in developing societies without any acknowledgements that ‘friends and family’ and favouritism occurs in the West too.

There were several references to the problems of our research technologies, alongside the statistical bias of many of the journals. We are going to need a wider range of different research methods to research the non-elite: they are much less likely to complete questionnaires and some may even be suspicious of the questions researchers ask face-to-face; we have found this, talking to refugees (‘internationally mobile workers’) whose previous experience of people asking them questions is that the answers are used against them. We should be doing more ethnographic research, more anthropological research, using visual records more, etc. And in turn that means engaging with different literatures (Englke’s ‘How to think like an anthropologist’ and Tett’s ‘Anthrovision’ were recommended).

Apparently, I said that most low-income workers are illiterate. If I did, that was a mistake: it is inaccurate and does not reflect my views. I am suspicious of the literacy data from many countries and I don’t believe the UNESCO figures taken from governments around the world, but most people are literate to some degree. I also note that there are states in Europe, for example, where, effectively, every single person is highly literate, there are other states amongst the developing countries where only an elite is literate and there are states like the USA where many people are highly literate but around 20% of people (over 60 million people in that case) struggle with reading and writing.

And, yes, to answer a specific question, I am, with some colleagues (always work with smart people) trying to write this up and to get it published!

I am happy to develop the discussion with new friends (and of course old ones) who contact me for that. Best of luck with your IHRM research into issues that are important for our world ...

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