**Bias and RCA**

The RCA Community of Practice has reflected long and hard on the issues of bias in research and recognises the need to demonstrate that the issues of intrinsic bias are not only accepted but also mitigated as much as possible.

From the selection of researchers, their training and development, the processes used to develop the research design, the selection of locations and study participants through to the analytical process the issue of bias is **BIG** and must be continually reflected upon. .

**Study participants’ bias**

There is a lot at stake when participating in any research from the point of view of the ‘researched’. It is well acknowledged that any research participants may adopt demand characteristics, may wish to be seen favourably (social desirability), may have difficulty with understanding questions, may feel unable to criticise, may feel there are incentives to giving the ‘right answer’ or to hiding information.

The **indivisible elements** of RCA provide a good basis for mitigating some of these human behavioural problems. The RCA highlights the importance of **using many ways** to get a deeper understanding of phenomena. **Conversations** enable iteration, asking questions in different ways, at different times, asking many people and using the environment to stimulate questions. When such conversations are combined with **observation** and **direct experience** this provides a good basis for mitigating both respondent and researcher bias. In particular,

* **Immersion enables observation** of possible disconnects between what is said and what is done;
* Living in people’s homes and becoming a learner (if done well and authentically) can **change power dynamics** – the researcher can become a listener, can be a passive listener to interactions between people rather than leading a discussion, can adopt a pace and rhythm in discussions which better suits the study participants
* **Familiar surroundings** can lead to more informality and openness;
* **Different spaces** can be flexibly utilised for different conversations (private and sensitive, family and shared),
* Those who cannot or do not want to participate or who are excluded in other types of research **may participate in RCA**;
* The researcher can become more **familiar with the context** which influences attitudes and behaviour by immersing in it (albeit for a short time).

**Researcher bias**

Good practice in RCA require that training programmes, briefings and debriefings focus on this issue and participants examine their own attitudes and biases (personal and professional), especially those related to specific studies through discussion, simulations and self and group critique. Researchers learn how to actively suspend judgment and examine how their behaviour can facilitate or obstruct openness and trust. There are also important training modules and resources on power analysis and power mapping is done routinely before every study.

One of the biggest risks is confirmation bias. To offset this RCA good practice requires that

* A minimum of three researchers are placed in each community but work independently of each other thus allowing for more confidence in corroborating data.
* Throughout the study, teamleaders require team members to continually exercise high levels of reflexivity to question their assumptions, biases and behaviour
* Post immersion, researchers participate (as location- specific sub- teams) in extensive debriefings to review information and findings emerging. This enables interrogation of the observations, experiences and responses and reduces the possibility of individual researcher bias.
* Validation workshops are held post field research with the entire research team to analyse and confirm the main findings and ensure that both specificity and diversity in the findings are captured, along with more generalizable findings.
* Coding and charting of insights from the field is done by a minimum of three senior researchers working independently of each other to meet the principles of rigour.