Eyewitness to Conflict and Peace: Key Informants and Causal Accounts of War and Peacebuilding

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Introduction

Key informants are often a central source of information in qualitative research on civil conflict, in particular when it comes to uncovering motivations for fighting or to stop fighting and causal accounts of war and peace.

Most qualitative research in the by now vast and steadily growing field of conflict and post-conflict studies relies on interviews one way or another. Some of he most prominent recent studies on the micro-dynamics of conflict such as Elizabeth Jean Wood's 'Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador' and Jeremy Weinstein's 'Inside Rebellion' relied on hundreds of interviews with a wide range of conflict actors and observers, from former rebel commanders, rank-and-file ex-combatants, victims and villagers to rural and urban elites and university professors (Wood 2003, 2006; Weinstein 2007). Similarly, recent insightful studies of international peacebuilding rely to a significant part on information gleaned from interviews efforts and local peacebuilding processes. For example, Séverine Autesserre conducted "more than 280 interviews conducted with Congolese politicians, military officers, diplomats, and civil society actors, victims of violence, staff of international organisations, and foreign observers" for her studies of the mismatch between international peacebuilding efforts and local conflict dynamics (Autesserre 2007, p. 425). In their analysis of why externally-driven post-conflict state-building on the African continent rarely achieves its high-flying goals, Pierre Englebert and Denis Tull rely to a large degree on "informal interviews with government officials, politicians, rebels and ex-rebels or militiamen, administrative personnel, civil society representatives, foreign diplomats and UN staff" (Englebert and Tull 2008, p. 110). And this trend continues or is growing - numerous graduate students or recent graduates in some of the top East Coast political science departments currently roam the war zones of this world to collect data and interview various conflict actors to deepen our understanding of conflict and peacebuilding dynamics.

However, despite the prominence of interviews as sources of information for studies of war and peace, there has been relatively little guidance for scholars embarking on field research in volatile conflict and post-conflict environments. The few texts in U.S. political science on interview methods have focused almost exclusively on interviewing high-ranking government decision-makers and other 'elites' (for example Aberbach and Rockman 2002). Little guidance exists for students of political science or international relations (IR) on how to conduct interviews with individuals in conflict or post-conflict settings (exceptions are Wood 2006 and the methodology annex in Weinstein 2007). It thus seems appropriate to take a closer look at the Do's and Don'ts of conducting interviews with individual respondents to study the origins and conduct of conflict as well as the dynamics of making and building peace.

This paper is based will proceed as follows. First, it will briefly review the confluence of different developments in U.S. political science and the social sciences in general which have contributed to the part-rehabilitation of qualitative research methods in general and the use of interviews in particular.

Subsequently, it will briefly discuss why interviews are particularly useful to study the causal mechanisms of conflict and peacebuilding. Ultimately, the main body of the paper provides reflections on how to go about selecting respondents and conducting interview in conflict and post-conflict environments, as well as the challenges, practical and ethical, field interviewers may encounter. The paper is based on my own limited experience doing field research in post-conflict and conflict zones in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Southern Sudan, Guinea and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).[1] It is very much work in progress and as much a reflection on personal experience as an academic paper.

Recent epistemological developments

Hailing from a multi-disciplinarily oriented IR department, I was at first puzzled that a database search for the composite term 'key informant interview' in the flagship journals of the American Political Science Association, the American Political Science Review (APSR) and Political Science & Politics (PS) only produced two hits – one for a 1957 APSR list of recent publications on research methods, which included an anthropological journal article on key informant interviewing and a second one in a 1977 book review which mentioned 'key-informant interviewing' as one of the methods used in a study on Mexican politics (March 1957; Adler Hellman 1977). As a consequence, I quickly realized that political scientists have been reflecting on interviews as a data collection tool only rarely, and if they have, then only under the label of 'elite' interviews (Berry 2002; Aberbach and Rockman 2002; Lilleker 2003).

From the point of view of traditional comparative political science and international relations (at least as practiced in the United States), this makes perfect sense. As practiced in the United States, mainstream political science has been largely concerned with decisions by elites: presidents or prime ministers, elected representatives, senior civil servants and the like. The common man and woman are mainly of interest as part of a larger aggregate category, such as the electorate, members of political parties, ethnic or social and various shades of interest groups. The views of the individual member of any of these categories rarely seemed of interest to political science researchers (of course, there are exceptions to the rule).

The focus of political scientists on elite decisions and composite groups has also been encouraged by the prevalent positivist research paradigm and the dominance of quantitative and rational choice methods in U.S. political science. If viewed through a positivist and quantitative lens, social and political problems are best studied by the analysis of quantifiable information that requires aggregation to derive statistical correlations between variables. Interpretivist or ethnographic methods were long confined to the margins of the discipline, even

[1] Most of my interviews with villagers, traditional local authorities, ex-combatants, and representatives of international organizations (IOs), international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and government officials were conducted as part of consultancy projects for several of these organizations. I also conducted preliminary field research for my dissertation in Sierra Leone in June and July 2007 and in Guinea in July and August 2008.

though Clifford Geertz and James Scott have been among the staples of comparative politics seminars since the 1970s (Geertz 1973, 1980; Scott 1985).

This has changed only in the past decade or two, due to the confluence of a number of factors, related to developments within the social sciences as well as prompted by real-life political and social changes.

The disciplinary diversification of political science prompted by the Perestroïka movement and other critics of the dominance of rational choice and quantitative methods (Monroe 2005) has led to a resurgence of thinking on and use of qualitative methods (Collier and Elman 2008) and even the growing use of interpretivist and feminist perspectives. This methodological rebalancing has also reached the study of conflict. After the focus on ethnic conflict of the early 1990s and the attention given to large-N quantitative studies that spawned the 'greed vs. grievance' debate in the late 1990s (Collier and Hoeffler 1998, 2001), a second major line of conflict research has developed concentrating on the local sources and dynamics of conflict. This "micro-political turn" (King 2004) in the study of collective violence prompted researchers to explore further connections between different levels of conflict analysis and put the spotlight increasingly on individual actors in conflicts (Kalyvas 2003).

At the same time, the increasing number of international interventions and attempts at conflict resolution triggered, on the one hand, a surge in studies not only of international policymaking around peacekeeping and peacebuilding interventions, but also to more and more detailed inquiries into the success and failure of interventions, not only at the macro, but also at the micro-level (Autesserre 2007). On the other hand, developments on the ground facilitated access to conflict zones and produced more information on those conflicts thanks to an increased number and greater complexity of international interventions and more and more detailed post-conflict assistance programs by international organizations and NGOs.

Against the backdrop of these epistemological developments, the use of interviews has become a key element in many conflict and post-conflict studies. What is the comparative advantage of interview methods? Why may conflict researchers in particular resort to interviews as a data-gathering tool?

Why use key informant interviews?

There are two main sets of reasons why students of conflict or peacebuilding choose interviews as a main data source: one is related to the research philosophy and the research design; the second one to more pragmatic choices related to the numerous challenges of conflict and post-conflict environments.

a) Ontological and epistemological reasons

Whether interviews provide information of interest to students of conflict depends on the deeper worldviews they hold as well as on epistemological predilections. What we want to know determines where and how we look for

data and what questions we want to ask. Hence, the choice of individual interviews as a data source is related first to the types of causal accounts the researchers seeks to uncover, and second to level of analysis chosen.

For obvious reasons, individual interviews have little or no role to play in strictly deductive rational choice research or research agendas favoring large-N studies which are based on a frequentist and correlational view of causation. Only large-N survey research allows for the statistical analysis and hypothesis testing in such research designs. In contrast, research relying on key informant interviews by nature subscribes to the more deterministic view of causation of the qualitative research tradition. It seeks to uncover causal mechanisms, i.e. the activities and processes which link causes and effects in a causal chain. To identify causal mechanisms, students need to get a nuanced and detailed understanding of historical processes and they need to be able to break larger historical events into micro-processes (Checkel 2005).

With respect to the levels of analysis in research on civil conflict, Stathis Kalyvas has concluded that a mere focus of conflict research on macro-level conflict leaves out important dimensions of conflict dynamics. According to Kalyvas, internal wars are often driven and sustained by numerous micro-conflict whose roots may be quite different from the larger civil conflict, or what he calls the 'master cleavage' (Kalyvas 2003, p. 475). Studies of civil war which focus solely on macro-conflict variables and explanations of macro-level outcomes may thus miss important causal dynamics.

These insights into the ontology of social violence and civil conflict have redirected at least some analytical attention in political science to focus on the micro-dynamics of conflict and the local sources of violence and how they are connected to larger conflict patterns. This holds equally true for research on post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding. There has been a growing interest in the study of the micro-dynamics of post-conflict reconstruction and how local political and social processes interact with internationally-driven peace- and state-building (for example Autesserre 2007; Englebert and Tull 2008; Roberts 2008; Blieseman de Guevara 2008).

To research these micro-dynamics and to be able to trace causal mechanisms, researchers require fine-grained information about those local processes and they need to use appropriate tools to gather this type of data. Or in the words of Charles King, "Doing research on these questions [of social conflict] demands an extreme sensitivity to microlevel social interactions, phenomena that can be studied only through detailed, almost ethnographic work." (King 2003, p. 449) Key informant interviews are a central part of this type of ethnographic work. As Jeremy Weinstein suggests, "...participant accounts offer unique and powerful insights into the choices individuals make and the operation of groups - insights that cannot be easily gleaned from traditional sources." (Weinstein 2007, p. 351)

Weinstein and Elizabeth Wood as the main proponents of detailed qualitative studies of civil conflict both claim for themselves to be doing "ethnography" (Wood 2006; Weinstein 2007) in conflict zones. Their use of the term

ethnography seems to be somewhat confusing, at least as compared to the traditional view of ethnography by anthropologists. Weinstein and Wood seem to be largely within the realm of a positivist approach to ethnography. It seems to be a combination of elements of political science, historiography, and ethnography akin to what Brady, Collier and Seawright have called "thick analysis" (Brady et al. 2003, p. 6) or to what sociologists have referred to as 'grounded theory' (Chamaz 2002) rather than the post-positivist ethnography of most contemporary anthropology (Willis and Trondman 2000, p. 6). Even though they both Weinstein and Wood leave their interviewees space to share their personal histories with the ultimate goal of constructing local histories, they interested in facts and reconstructing events, informal organizational structures and practices rather than analyzing the deeper symbolic meaning of these life histories for how respondents construct culture and history.

We can thus conclude that, even though the bulk of the literature and how-to guides on qualitative interviewing is by sociologists and anthropologists who consider that "the epistemology of qualitative interview tends to be more constructivist than positivist" and that interview participants should be seen as "meaning makers, not passive conduits for retrieving information" (Warren 2002, p. 83), conflict researchers in political science seem to subscribe to a largely positivist logic of interviewing.

b) Practical reasons

However, questions of research design are not the only reason for researchers to opt for key informant interviews as a central source of information. In conflict and post-conflict environments, the challenges to collect any kind of reliable information can be considerable and might limit the questions that can be asked and analyzed.

Data sources

Reliable data sources are scarce in conflict zones. Most internal wars take place in impoverished countries where god record keeping is rare to begin with and government data collection is intermittent in the best of times. The most interesting government activities belong to the realm of the 'shadow' state (Reno 1998) and take place hidden from public view. Information on conflicting parties' motivations, mobilizing strategies and conflict bargaining behavior is generally scarce and can often only be uncovered through interviews with key actors among governments and rebel groups or other warring parties.

Not only do archives and paper records become collateral damage in war, as they burn, tear and disintegrate easily, or are deliberately destroyed by those who might be disinclined to leave a public record their doings in office. For example, the military junta that seized power in Sierra Leone from May 1997 until March 1998 is said to have systematically destroyed treasury records related to dubious transactions by its associates (Keen 2005, p. 209). In addition, rebel groups may not be concerned with documenting and archiving their written communications, so students interested in the inner workings of rebel

movements have little written information to go by. Although the prosecution at the Special Court of Sierra Leone was able to retrieve remarkably detailed written records, in particular radio-logs, but also communiqués, statements, and instructions by the leadership.[2]

This situation is aggravated by the often politically charged environment in hot conflicts and in immediate post-conflict situations. International news outlets rarely report daily on the intricacies of wars in far-flung places. Their reporters often parachute in for days at a time only and are largely confined to capitals. They thus rarely report on local conflict dynamics. Local journalistic standards are often poor and newspapers usually affiliated with certain political camps, rendering local news reports a dubious source of information.

Consequently, due to the lack of hard data on the conduct of most wars, eye witnesses to the fighting, whether commanders, foot soldiers, victims, or those who watched from the sidelines and managed to stay out of harms way are a central source of information

This situation is hardly any different in post-conflict environments, where deep suspicion between former foes often persists and information is a political commodity. For example, in post-war Sierra Leone, most newspapers are closely or loosely affiliated with the government or the main opposition party, which often leads to diametrically opposite accounts of key events, in particular when it comes to motivation and causation. Those newspapers who are trying to remain independent are frequently harassed and intimidated or try to self-censor and frequently chose to leave out key information from news reports in a desire to not offend anyone.

Moreover, information on peacebuilding decision-making emanating from the numerous intervenors in post-conflict situations are generally filtered through the lenses of official mandates, institutional interests and standard operation procedures. Just like in other policy-making environments, interviews are thus often the best means of breaking into the black box of organizational decision-making.

Interviews and research design

Where in a research design do interviews fit in? Individual interviews are one of many data sources in qualitative research designs complementing documentary evidence, news reports, donor documents and other written sources that might be available in conflict and post-conflict settings.

Most conflict and post-conflict research stress the importance of having a very good grasp of other available evidence on conflicts before interviews are conducted. Questions can be targeted more specifically to certain groups and tailored to soliciting information on specific issues once the researcher has

[2] Personal information received from members of the Office of the Prosecutor of the SCSL.

reviewed all existing written accounts of the war. This will make the interviews richer and more productive for all parties involved.

However, due to funding or other constraints, the timing of field research might not always allow researchers to be fully proficient on a given context and country history upon starting field research. I do not necessarily see this as a problem. Many people of all walks of life in conflict-torn places are extremely grateful for the attention given to them by international researchers and they generally do not assume any knowledge on the part of the researcher on their country and the conflict. This can be advantageous since asking basic and what may seem naïve questions can sometime yield richer and more detailed accounts. In particular in ethnographic research, there is also an argument to be made about researchers not coming in with a lot of (sometimes flawed) assumptions about a conflict or location and discover things through the eyes of interviewees.

Obviously, this there is a fine line between deliberate ignorance and true naïveté, but as long as the researcher has a good general knowledge about a field site and is open about his/her shortfalls in knowledge and humble about it in discussions, this would only be problematic with certain target groups or individuals, such as local academics, high-ranking government or international officials.

In this context, I also found key informant interviews conducted for the purpose preliminary field research to be extremely useful since they allow the scholar to do a reality-check on hypotheses and variables derived from theoretical literature. It can help students avoid going down a wrong track and having to fundamentally change their research designs once they get on the ground for the actual field research. I found a particular category of informants whom I call 'non-expert experts' useful during preliminary field research or in the early stages of field interviewing. Non-expert experts are keen local observers who, despite usually not being trained as social scientists, can provide analytically quite sophisticated accounts of local social and political dynamics around conflict and post-conflict peacebuilding. They are often teachers, former government officials, local businessmen (they generally are men in the countries I visited) or other individuals who have a keen sense of observation and are well versed in local discourse on politics and conflict. In short, they have local expertise, first and second-hand knowledge of relevant issues while not being trained in the social scientific analysis of those issues. Assessments by non-expert experts give the researcher a good sense of prevailing local discourse on causes and drivers of conflict and peace. They thus provide less specific data points for the researcher's ultimate analysis but are very helpful in shaping hypotheses and focusing later interview questions. They can also prove to be valuable contacts for local referrals and as entry point to certain local networks later.

Even though there are obvious funding constraints that would prohibit preliminary field visits and interviews, they might help save money at a later stage when field trips need to be extended due to fundamental changes to the research design.

Elites or 'non-elites' ? - Choosing respondents

How to choose respondents in a conflict or post-conflict environment can be a complex issue. Due to the nature of the research environment – limited accessibility and dispersed populations – probability sampling is not an option for identifying interview respondents.

Fully aware of the biases that certain groups hold about the interpretation of conflicts, their causes, evolution, issues at stakes and pathways for resolution, most conflict researchers attempt to interview individuals from a range of backgrounds. The views of rank-and-file soldiers or peasants can be as important as the opinions from military dictators or elected elites.

As a consequence, the traditional focus in political science on interviewing elites and the vague analytical distinction 'elite' or 'non-elite' are of little relevance in a conflict setting. What matters is who the persons are who can contribute specific accounts of aspects of the conflict, either due to their belonging to a specific group – military, rebels, ethnic, political or other – or by having witnessed events first-hand by having been in a specific place at a specific time.

At the level of decision-makers and leaders, the key informants are easy to identify from generic accounts of the war, historical studies and news accounts. Whether they can be easily reached once the war is over might depend on the type of resolution of the conflict and on the post-conflict dispensation. Rebel leaders or opposition politicians may have left the country for fear of retribution and might be harder to track down. In an age when leaders might have to fear prosecution for war crimes, this problem might be even more acute.

Identifying key informants among popular groups is much more challenging. Victims and potential witnesses to fighting have fled the country and may be dispersed in various refugee or displaced persons camps. Rebel fighters may equally attempt to meld back into the general population, usually not in their towns of origin, or leave the country for fear of retribution. And even if those groups are easily identifiable, it is by no means straightforward how to target those informants that are 'key' to establishing as complete an account of a given conflict as possible.

Tools that have been used by sociologists or public health professionals to reach 'hidden' populations such as injecting drug users, alcoholics or people with other features carrying social stigma in Western societies provide some guidance for targeting interview respondents in conflict and post-conflict zones.

In cases where certain groups are geographically concentrated or where researchers are interested in certain geographic locations due to a particular feature of the conflict – for example conflict intensity, certain key battles, the presence of different types of rebel groups – the targeting of one or a few key locations might be a useful entry point for researchers.

However, in most conflicts, fighting will have been spread out, rebel groups may have been split in numerous factions, and the intensity and conduct of the war may have differed from one location to another. Consequently, most interview-based conflict or post-conflict research uses a variant of chain-referral sampling or snowball sampling (Erickson 1979??; Heckathorn 2002; Gusterson 2008)

Chain referral sampling relies on existing social networks and is suitable when members know each other or are closely connected. Once the researcher gets entry to one person in the network, that person is able to refer other members in the network. As Gusterson put it, "ethnographers entering the field seek to ally with gatekeepers who will vouch for them and to avoid falling in with the wrong crowd" (Gusterson 2008, p. 96). Most rural societies in developing countries have dense social networks or hierarchies and getting to know those gatekeepers can provide the researcher with access a large number of respondents with certain characteristics.

This is equally true with respect to rebel groups, where wartime command structures often persist, often long after demobilization and reintegration. For example, in 2007 I was involved in a research project to assess the strengths and weaknesses of a particular approach to disarm recalcitrant rebel groups for the UN in an African country. We were quick to identify ex-combatants in villages and towns near their original site of operation. All ex-combatants were eager and willing to share their side of the story and referred us to other ex-combatants within their former network in Monrovia, which ultimately, after several days of informal vetting and a fleeting preliminary encounter with an emissary of the former top commander, took us to a meeting with the rebel leader in a small bar in a suburb, in an area where ex-combatants were known to gather during the day. All this happened within a three-week timeframe.

This strategy is also generally successful in post-conflict situations. In 2007, I interviewed elected local councilors and traditional chiefs in three districts in Sierra Leone. Contacts among local NGOs usually referred me to one local councilor, who put me in touch with other councilors and often introduced me to the Paramount Chief. Since councilors and Paramount Chiefs compete for local resources and local political control to some extent, both sides were usually willing to share their views since they knew I had talked to the other side. The one interview I conducted with a Paramount Chief without having a local introduction was significantly less fruitful than the others.

While chain-referral sampling is an effective tool to reach networked groups, it introduces serious bias in the interview sample for obvious reasons. As the term 'gatekeeper' suggests, initial contacts can yield a lot of influence in channeling the research toward one group over others. Initial contacts may only refer the researcher to individuals who share their worldview or their analysis of the conflict or key events, which leads to what sociologists have called the "homophily bias" (McPherson and Smith-Lovin 1987). Unless the researcher has a good grasp of the dynamics of the conflict, its historical evolution, and the existence of different groups or sub-groups among a rebel or political movement, they may miss important competing views. As an illustration, there are at least

two local NGOs formed by enterprising ex-combatants in Sierra Leone after their demobilization. Those groups, centrally located in capital Freetown[3], are usually the first point of contact for researchers arriving in Sierra Leone and they seem to tap into the same networks of their former comrades in arms for interviews. I observed some interviews conducted by a colleague in 2007 with an ex-combatant group located just outside Freetown, during which the ex-combatant complained that they frequently get to talk to researchers but receive little benefits or assistance from these interactions. This also seems to indicate that often urban-based groups are oversampled in non-random samples, in particular if researchers do not spend a lot of time in the country.

Similarly, among rural populations it is key to have a sense of social organization and where a respondent might fall within a certain hierarchy. Usually, outsiders get to speak to members of ruling classes mainly and will have a much harder time to get access to subordinate or marginalized individuals.

Mitigating strategies

Bias in non-probability samples is inevitable and hard to quantify (for an attempt see Heckathorn 2002). It is key, though, that researchers in conflict areas are aware of biases, discuss them openly in their research design and take measures to hedge against the worst effects of sample bias.

For example, Jeremy Weinstein suggests to interview combatants and civilians of diverse backgrounds and opinions in different locations, mixing elite interviews in urban areas with accounts by rebels of different ranks in rural areas. He also constructed what he calls 'social histories' of the conflict in two locations in each country case, selecting one area of clear rebel control and a second more contested area. In addition, he solicited the views of civilian witnesses to the war and made sure to interview those sympathetic to government view as well as those in favor of the opposition (Weinstein 2007, pp. 357).

Those methods require significant investments in terms of time and resources. To avoid the homophily bias in sample selection, it seems essential that the researcher spend significant time with respondents and gets to know their habitual environment and community to identify those biases. Alternatively, when time is more limited, it is essential for scholars to find out as much personal information about the respondents to be able to map certain social relationships and to assess whether most respondents belong to the same networks. Cross-checking information from different sources with local experts – academics, journalists, or other long-standing observers – also helps to prevent this type of bias from tainting analyses.

[3] Ironically, one of them has its office right across the street from the Special Court for Sierra Leone, the special UN/Government of Sierra Leone war crimes tribunal.

Getting access to key informants

Physical access

Physical access to hot war zones is obviously limited due to concerns about personal security. No research is important enough to risk a promising scholar's (or anyone's) life. Even in post-war environments, zones of instability might persist in particular in areas of a country where there has been a high concentration of fighting or rebel activity. Other areas may be mined or may infrastructure may simply be too poor for researchers to access certain areas. Thus, in particular for research in zones where conflict terminated only recently, physical limitations to access certain areas and groups may introduce a natural bias into sampling key informants.

Access to government and international officials

Once physical access and infrastructural issues can be worked out, access to individuals is often not that hard, provided the researcher has the proper referrals. Yet, even without referrals, the advent of cell phones has made access even easier. African officials are usually not shy to share their mobile phone number with a wide range of people. If the researcher is able to get access to those numbers, even cold-calling officials, while not a preferred strategy, can be an option. I have always been amazed at how easy it is get access to even high-ranking government officials in particular in West African post-conflict countries. With the right referrals, access is usually not terribly hard and often more a question of being flexible enough to accommodate shifting schedules of local officials and last minute changes to appointments or long waits in the officials antechamber or outside the chief's house for the promised audience.

For obvious reasons, access to officials during hot conflicts may be much more restricted given security concerns and political sensitivities. Generally even there, though, with the right contacts in local government circles, access to high-ranking local officials or certain rebel leaders seems to be possible.

While local officials are usually not too hard to access, it is questionable whether they provide the richest source of information. High-ranking officials often stick more closely to the party line. For younger researchers it is also harder to establish good rapport with African officials who value age and white hair and sometimes do not take younger researchers seriously. To build rapport by showing detailed knowledge and competence is the only way to win the trust of such 'big men.'

The more useful sources are often second tier government officials since they are generally younger and feel less compelled to stick to official pronouncements. Those individuals are harder to track down, though, and to access. Since most people at that tier of government know each other well, once one has won the trust of one individual within the network, access to others becomes easy.

Ironically, my experience from Sierra Leone and Liberia suggests that it sometimes can be much harder to get staff of international organizations to agree to an interview, notably among the higher ranks, but even among less senior officials. In part this may be due to frequent requests by researchers to speak to those individuals and those officials may simply feel too squeezed by their existing work to make time to talk to researchers. There might also be a feeling that most researchers are critical of IO policies and hence the desire of IO staff to talk to them might be limited.

One effective and efficient way of getting access to local and international officials is to seek invitations to donor conferences or other large meetings between international and government representatives. Once the researcher has the official seal of approval of being invited to such a meeting, it is fairly easy to approach even government ministers and certainly their aides to explain one's mission and set up interviews. In August 2008, I was lucky enough to get invited to a three-day 'National Days of Reflection' workshop between all important political and social actors in Guinea. In attendance was the who-is-who of Guinean politics and society (except for the president himself, who is too infirm to attend such meetings) and it was a great opportunity to strike up informal conversations with anyone from government officials to military officers and civil society advocates. Unfortunately, this event took place two days before my scheduled departure and it did not lead to additional interview appointments, but at least it allowed to make many good contacts for the future.

Location of the interview

It can be quite challenging in any poor country context to find locations suitable for private conversations for two reasons. First, this can be simply due to the lack of appropriate locales. In particular in rural areas and even more so in war zones or former war zones, let alone in refugee camps, finding private space to discuss sensitive information can be nearly impossible. Second, in societies with communal cultures where life generally takes place in public spaces asking someone to conduct a conversation in private might seem strange and even suspicious, in particular if the interlocutor is of the opposite sex. The best guide is to let the respondent choose the location after explaining the purpose of the research and the topics that will be broached. I did not find that individuals were necessarily inhibited by having family members or neighbors around when talking to researchers. If they seem inhibited, it might be helpful for the researcher to suggest looking for a more private space or trying to take the person aside after the end of the interview and follow up on issues that might have been left out or where answers seem generic.

Things can become problematic when individual interviews turn into creeping focus groups and one ends up interviewing entire neighborhoods or villages instead of the original respondent. This is often inevitable in rural setting and can yield fascinating and rich information, even though the attribution of the information might become problematic. Information from such creeping focus groups can provide good contextual information and material for further questions for individuals from among the group at a later stage.

Structured vs. semi-structured interviews

Once the sample of informants is identified, conflict and post-conflict researchers have to decide what method of interviewing is best-suited gather the information required to answer the research question.

Generally, political scientists who frequently rely on interviews seem to have a preference for semi-structured or informal interviews. As Jeffrey Berry suggests, "excellent interviewers are excellent conversationalists. They make interviews seem like a good talk among old friends" (Barry 2002, p. 679). Others add that respondents "do not like being put in the straightjacket of close-ended questions" (Aberbach and Rockman 2002, p. 674).

While the above comments were made in the context of studying U.S. politics, not boxing interviewer and interviewee into a set of standardized questions is even more relevant in highly volatile interview situations. For the relatively unstructured environment of conflict and post-conflict research, a majority of researchers seem to be strongly in favor of semi-structured interviews since they manage to tread the middle ground between entirely inductive storytelling (see below) and providing some theoretically informed structure. They also allow the respondent to remember possibly traumatic events at their own pace and respect their memory and psychosocial needs much more than structured questioning.

Of course, researchers need to be well prepared for each specific interview, whether they talk to high-powered policymakers, local dignitaries or rebel soldiers who fought in the trenches. Veterans of the semi-structured interview highlight the importance of tailoring interviews to specific groups of respondents (Gusterson 2008, p. 105). To be well prepared, the issues need to be clearly framed and potential strands of questioning should be thought through.

Some interviewers suggest starting off with a few set questions, mainly about the respondent's background, but maybe also about some fundamental values or other motivations or interests that the researcher wants to compare across target groups (Aberbach and Rockman 2002). Similarly, interviewers generally look favorably on updating questions as the researcher learns new facts rather than sticking closely to the same questions across time (Ibid.; Gusterson 2008). Others see most benefit in using as many open questions that encourage the respondent to tell their story at their own pace. This approach can range from guided "grand tour question" (Leech 2002) à la 'Could you describe your experience during the rebel attack?', to the guided telling of 'life stories' (Atkinson 2002).

Recording interview data?

While recording interviews on tape or digitally is almost de rigueur in Western settings - after prior consent by the interviewee, of course; – notebook and pen are preferable in conflict and post-conflict settings. Voice recording, while making for more complete and accurate accounts, adds an additional layer of complication when the main concern for the conflict and post-conflict researcher

is to build a relationship of trust with the respondent. The use of voice recorders could signal to the interviewee that data might be used otherwise and potentially for pernicious purposes. It increases the suspicion of the interviewee as to the intentions of the researcher and adds additional difficulties with respect to protecting the informant in politically volatile environments. Most political scientists doing field research in conflict environments seem to prefer good old pen and paper over recording devices (Wood 2006, p. 381; Cammett 2006, p. 17; Weinstein 2007, p. 363).

Fact or fiction? - Validity and reliability of causal accounts from interviews

As noted above, fine-grained data gleaned from interviews about the motivation for conflict escalation and de-escalation is central to establishing causal accounts of conflict and peacebuilding. How reliable is such data, though? Generally, interviewers have to deal with various potential sources of inaccuracy or distortion.

In particular in situations where power and status differentials are significant (which would be the cast in most conflict and post-conflict settings), the respondents might feel compelled to simply tell the interviewer what they think he or she wants to hear.

Distortions in respondents' accounts are thus usually not deliberate attempts to trick the researcher. Human memory is fallible, and in particular in the confusing fog of war, individuals perception of actual events might be clouded. Trauma from being forcibly recruited into rebel groups or from having seen atrocities and experienced loss and deprivation can have a serious impact on individuals' memory. In this context, interviewers also need to take into account the importance of rumors and oral history in most African societies (Simons 1995). I have encountered on many occasions what seemed to be eyewitness accounts of war-related events due to the level of detail and complexity of the account. When probed, though, respondents admitted to not having been on location for the event, but having gleaned all these details from common local discourse and tales of the war. For example, several respondents in southern Guinea gave me quite specific accounts of a key showdown near a strategic bridge when Liberian and Sierra Leonean rebels attacked southern Guinea in September 2000,[4] even though later, when asked, they admitted not having been at the site, but relying on common tales of the battle by participants of the war and local wismen and storytellers. It is thus important for the interviewer to always gently probe informants about the accuracy of their observations and the whether they indeed were on site to witness the events they describe.

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[4] The battle is commonly described by locals as a battle of local ethnic groups' 'magic' and spiritual resources against the intruders inferior protection from magic. Locals describe the make-up of the local troops and the strategy of the invaders to send an undressed woman with magic powers ahead of the invading troops to blind and crush the enemy. The tale suggest, though, some of the spells of the local militias were stronger and managed to penetrate the woman's protective charms. When she was killed, the rebels ran and were subsequently defeated. This also highlights and aspect of field research in West Africa not treated here – the importance of the occult and spiritual, which can be hard to examine by fundamentally positivist research methods.

Related to rumors, but slightly different in nature, is the presence of prevailing local discourse on certain issues. In particular in post-conflict settings local discourse is often heavily influenced by international vocabulary and terminology that can distort local narratives significantly. For instance, in most conflict and post-conflict zones many individuals talk about 'human, women's or child rights violations', and the narrative of 'corruption' being a central cause to conflict. From their interactions with the international aid industry, locals have become accustomed to use the language of Western intervenors and frame their claims and accounts so that they match local discourse. It thus requires awareness of this discourse and some deeper probing by the researcher to cut through the adopted terminology and get informants to frame accounts in their own terms in areas that have been heavily influenced by an international presence.

A final reason why informant testimony may be inaccurate is the common consumption of intoxicants of various sorts by respondents in conflict and post-conflict settings. Drug use is common in particular among ex-combatants, and the consumption of alcohol consumption is frequent among respondents of all walks of life. I have rarely conducted or witnessed group interviews with ex-combatants where at least some among them were intoxicated. Whoever has visited government offices in many African countries knows that the consumption of beer can be standard procedure after lunchtime. Equally, in rural areas most males will mark the end of the workday (which could start early afternoon given that people start their work often around 6am) with one or several mid-afternoon drinks of local liquor such as palm wine or banana beer or the like. Intoxication obviously helps with the loquaciousness of the interlocutor, but might cloud their memory and makes it harder to assess the validity of the accounts. It also can make the interview more challenging, in particular if interviewees become agitated and more emotional and might become more aggressive when the veracity of their accounts is challenged. In my experience it is best, to discount interviews during which the respondent is visibly intoxicated and try to reschedule for a later date. Intoxication is one important reason why it is always advisable to follow local practices and schedule interviews before lunchtime or at the latest before 3pm.

There can, however, also be more intentional attempts by interviewees to alter history. Parties to a conflict might have an interest in re-writing history and providing post-hoc rationalizations for their actions in ways that are very different from their original motivation. This can range from a slight reinterpretation of events, conversations, and interactions to the outright lies and the distortion of facts.

While interviewers always need to respect the personal choice of the interviewee to tell the truth or not, gentle prodding and diplomatic challenges to accounts that seem dubious are often all it takes for respondents to open up. In this context, it is helpful to invoke third party accounts or authoritative sources such as politicians or prominent studies to frame questions in a way that de-personalizes the challenge, such as, 'Newspaper XX seems to have a different

explanation for this same event. What is your view of their version of the story?' This usually helps to prevent tension to build up in the conversation.

Calling out lies seems generally inappropriate and counterproductive and could lead to outright hostility (Wood 2006, p. 382). In the case of ex-combatants, it often helps to provide them with avenues to talk about the perpetration of acts of violence or physical harm that do not seem to be judging and that helps them to save face, for example by using euphemisms for certain morally questionable activities or focusing on what other member of the group did rather than what they did themselves. Wood (Ibid.) suggests to naively ask for elaboration as a useful strategy to get ex-combatants to reflect on their violent acts.

In this context, however, interviewers should also keep in mind their own cultural frames and biases. For many individuals in war zones, dates, times, or other measurements may not have the same importance. The fact that individuals may mix up such specific details does not necessarily challenge their general causal accounts.

Generally, the only means for the interview researcher to mitigate against distorted accounts and post-hoc rationalizations is to triangulate information properly. For political scientists, it is unlikely that interviews would provide the only source of information during their research. Both Weinstein and Wood stress the importance of consulting a large number of data sources – written accounts of all sorts such as existing academic studies, newspaper articles, radio transcripts, IO and NGO reports and documents – to situate the interview data in a broader analysis of the conflict. Similarly, as discussed above, it is important to choose respondents of different ideological or political camps and to triangulate information as much as possible between different interview sources (Weinstein 2007, p. 55).

In this context the importance of long-term commitment to particular countries and research sites can also pay off. Informants are less likely to distort their accounts if they know the researcher will come back for follow up and if the relationship they started is considered to be long-term.

There might be moments, though, when competing accounts about a particular incident cannot be reconciled. During the abovementioned case study I worked on for the UN about the disarming of a recalcitrant rebel group in an African country the researchers had collected a number of accounts from ex-rebels across all ranks about UN troops shooting their guns at retreating rebels after a particular incident. However, all UN officials who were on the site and the UN military hierarchy categorically denied that any shot was every fired. In the end, both views were juxtaposed in the final study as subjective truths of either side and the emphasis of the analysis was placed on the impact the perception that the UN engaged in a hostile encounter had on subsequent rebel decision-making.

Various challenges in key informant interviewing

Researcher's identity

The researcher's own identity might be as much a burden (race, gender, social, class, educational divides) as it can be an asset. Differences in race, gender, social status or class might hinder or facilitate access to different groups of people. Often, the mere fact of being a foreigner works to the researcher's advantage since most cultures require of their members to be hospitable and welcoming to strangers. Being from a completely different culture might thus facilitate access to communities. Both Weinstein and Wood consider their being complete outsiders to the communities they interviewed with no obvious agendas to have been an advantage in their research (Weinstein 2007, p. 364; Wood 2006, p. 377). They both also mention that the fact that they were American did not hinder or rather helped their endeavor (Ibid.). This might certainly not be the case in other parts of the world in the post-9/11 and post-Iraq war world.

While all outsiders will be afforded more or less the same hospitality in most cultures, access to certain groups of informants might be complicated by the mere identity of the interviewer. Notably, gender differences might affect how open men or women may be with an interviewer from the opposite sex (or, in some cultures, whether they can even talk to each other). Likewise, significant age differences can make it harder for younger researchers to establish a rapport with older respondents in societies where age is equated with wisdom. This effect might be countered by the fact that there is also great respect for learned people. In some communities the mere fact that someone from a foreign university would come to talk to them is seen as an honor. Nonetheless, I have encountered certain hesitation and patronizing inclination by older government officials and particularly by traditional leaders and elders, which renders those interviews sometimes less substantive and fruitful.

Neutrality

Another challenge for conflict and post-conflict scholars is to maintain neutrality or impartiality with respect to the situation on the ground. Upon entering the field, researchers need to reflect clearly on the language they choose to present their project in order not to inadvertently take sides in a given conflict. Melani Cammett (2006, p. 16) suggests offering as technical a description of the project as possible and avoiding making political references. No matter how neutral the terminology chosen is, informants usually have their own perceptions of the ulterior motives of the researcher's investigation. It is helpful to go to some lengths in assuring skeptical informants about one's affiliations. Business cards, student or other university IDs and letters of endorsement by professors and supervisors can be useful evidence to bolster the credibility of one's story. Wood suggest that sometimes affiliation with local universities or research institutions might help, even though it introduces another potential sources of perceived political bias if the institution is seen as friendly to one camp or another (Wood 2006).

Weinstein suggests that the fact that he "arrived in small villages with not much more than a backpack and remained for weeks at a time" went a long way

toward establishing his credentials of not having any particular agenda (Weinstein 2007, p. 364).

Staying neutral and impartial can be hard, in particular when the research involves grave human rights abuses and other obvious injustices or when the researcher is confronted with overly biased accounts, blatant accusations and insults by informants. This puts the researcher in a quandary whether to challenge such openly partisan accounts or not. It is also tempting to sympathize too much with informants and to take sides in an interview in an attempt to build trust with the respondent in the hope of coaxing more detailed information out of them. This strategy can backfire, though, since it adds bias to the informant's account and, at a more practical level, word may get around of the assumed political views of the researcher, which may shut other doors (Cammett 2006, p. 16). I find it useful to usually just listen patiently even to overly biased and political accounts. Some interviewees feel the need to receive open affirmation from the interviewer for their views. In such a situation, I usually state that I fully understand their position, but point out that I have also heard opposite views from other respondents. This shows respect for the interviewee while signaling that I am disinclined to take sides.

Interpreters and research assistants

In many research settings it is inevitable to hire research assistants or interpreters. They can be key resources themselves and very helpful in navigating the research environment by making introductions and facilitating contacts as well as local logistics. However, they also add another potential level of bias and might act as gatekeeper preventing the researcher to truly get to learn about local dynamics. It is common for interpreters and RAs to take an interest of their own in the research and to inject their views and editorialize interview responses instead of translating them word-by-word. Most researchers having worked through interpreters may have encountered the classical situation where respondents seem to give elaborate accounts, which are rendered by the interpreter into one-sentence translations that might give the general gist of the response but leave out rich and important details. Therefore it is of utmost importance that potential research assistants and interpreters are as thoroughly vetted by the researcher as possible in a given context with respect to their origins, background, affiliations, and previous work. I have found it to be useful not to rely on one researcher only, but on a number of local graduate students in different field locations. This is often necessary due to different language requirements in different parts of the country and helps to diffuse that any one of them gets too involved in my research. I am also usually skeptical of relying too much on local facilitators who have done a lot of work with other researchers. While they can be incredibly helpful in opening certain doors, they also have a tendency to view topics through the lenses used by previous researchers and often rely on the same networks of contacts who may already have been interviewed for other research projects. Of course, in a hot conflict environment there may not be many qualified individuals at hand to serve in such a role.

In this context it is worth noting the importance of the general awareness by the field researcher that everything he or she does sends a message to local informants. The most important general advice is for researchers to not walk uninformed into situations and think through what signals certain behaviors and choices might send (Cammett 2006, p. 17). Pre-departure inquiries with colleagues or more established researchers who have conducted field research in a particular environment are crucial in that respect. This is true even for other people he or she surrounds him/herself with. For example, most field researchers who have to use drivers to reach field locations should be aware of the origins and interests of the driver, since they can prove to be good resources for further local contacts. Yet they can also be obstacles if they are from the wrong ethnic group or take too much of an interest in the research and try to get involved in conversations or provide information about the researcher to other parties.

Ethical issues

Ethical issues abound in field research and many of the abovementioned challenges also have ethical implication. Other authors have discussed ethical issues in ethnography and field research generally in greater detail. I will thus focus here on three particular areas that are of particular importance to conflict and post-conflict interviewing or have no been discussed at length in the existing literature.

Informed consent and the protection of respondent's identity

Wood (2006, pp. 379) discusses the challenges of ensuring informed consent to be interview and to use interview data in greater detail. In general, there is concern among field researchers of all stripes in political science that IRB approvals premised on the obtainment of signed consent forms are impracticable for most field research (MacLean 2006) for many reasons, but in conflict zones simply for the fact that it would provide an easy record to link interviewees to the researcher, thus endangering the respondents rather than helping to protect them. Wood highlights that politically charged environments such as in conflict zones it is important to clearly spell out the purpose of the research and the potential risks that respondents take in talking to the researcher and to openly discuss all the steps the interviewer is taking to ensure the confidentiality of the testimonies recorded. This includes a discussion of the benefits of the research or the lack thereof for the individuals interviewed (see also below).

The respect for interviewees' privacy and security should be an absolute priority for the researcher. This means not only to be fully transparent about the research process, but also to take measures to protect the respondents identity and to avoid any harm to their reputation, social standing or prestige in their local, social, or professional communities. Common measure to ensure informants' safety include to keep interview notes and transcription separate from the names and location of the interviewees, to keep notes in a safe location and transfer them safely so that they cannot easily be found at checkpoints or during searches or during electronic transfer, and to protect respondents' identity in the actual

research product by not attributing information f it could pose the slightest risk to them (even if they agreed to being cited). (Wood 2006, pp. 379; Cammett 2006, p. 17).

Power differentials

The political science literature on interviewing and research in conflict and post-conflcit environments does not usually problematize power relationships. Discussing power as an issue in field research seems to be considered a topic reserved for other disciplines, notably anthropology, feminist literature or other social science sub-disciplines inspired by post-structuralism (for example Smith 2006).

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews encourage the respondent to share very personal views, feelings, and reflections on highly sensitive topics. In conflict and post-conflict settings, where many populations are inherently more vulnerable due to the sensitive nature of what they might have witnessed, the heightened importance of group affiliations, displacement, deprivation, and the potential trauma that they might have experienced.

It would be advisable for political scientists engaged in key informant interviews in conflict and post-conflict settings to engage in some deeper reflection on the effects of such power differentials for their research. Critical theorists have some interesting points to make about the way the interviewer controls the interview and may use terminology and discourse in a way that is able to generate the types of information and the causal accounts the interviewer is looking for (Briggs 2002). Conflict and post-conflict researchers thus should be self-reflective about power differentials and about the ways their research and their findings may reflect existing power relationships.

How to give back?

The question of reciprocity and giving back to the country and the communities in which research has been conducted is a perennially knotty one. It is unlikely that this question will ever be resolved to everybody's satisfaction. I share the feeling of several of my colleagues who regularly conduct field research that there is somehow no appropriate way for giving back to local respondents and their communities. There is a sense that, no matter how open we are to their needs an interests, there is an element of exploitation to the interaction where we walk away with rich information, upon which we ultimately build our careers, while the local populations are left with little more than fleeting memories of encounters with strangers.

As most conflict and post-conflict researchers point out, in particular individuals from populations who do not usually get to talk to foreigners are generally eager to share their stories. Elizabeth Wood, reflecting on her research in El Salvador, suggests that her "inquiries were met with the enthusiastic collaboration of many residents of the case-study zones…Residents acted on a willingness (perhaps even a need in some sense) to discuss with an outside researcher their own

history and that of their families and communities. Perhaps this willingness is a measure of the trauma and change brought by the war. Those interviewed frequently expressed a desire for their story to be told, that some account (or accounting) be made of the local history of the civil war." (Wood 2006, p. 377)

This generally matches my experience. A certain sense of empowerment that lower ranking ex-combatants or regular farmers or groups of women or young people usually left out of the common local discourse dominated by older males may feel might be all that is needed for respondents not to feel that they are being taken advantage of or getting the short end of the deal. To truly live up to this kind of reciprocity, Wood also suggests that researchers need to ensure that their findings is somehow shared and published locally and ideally made available to the interviewees (Ibid. p. 382). This is much easier to achieve when researchers focus on one country over many years and nurture long-term relationships (as Wood has), but much harder for comparative researchers whose studies span continents or who shift geographical foci.

In more mature post-conflict settings (i.e. several years after the end of conflict and after having experienced many internationally funded peacebuilding efforts), this enthusiasm among locals to share their views can quickly turn to cynicism, though. This is particularly the case at sites where respondents have been counted, sampled, interviewed, and assessed multiple times by NGOs, government officials, or World Bank and UN projects. Despite all attempts by researchers to dissociate themselves from international relief and aid efforts, many local respondents still assume that there is some kind of link and that the researcher might ultimately be able to provide or at least advocate for more assistance.

Wherever I go and interview individuals from conflict-affected or socio-economically poor communities, I do sense an expectation that I am here to leave something and that I can never fully shake off the feeling that I leave interviewees feeling disappointed in the end if the pay-off is not immediate and tangible, no matter how many disclaimers I have made at the outset. This could in part be due to my background in the humanitarian aid and development business, in part due to the fact that I usually interact with communities who have received significant amounts of international aid. So automatically, most Westerners who have visited those communities in the past were part of the aid industry and many of them have indeed actively helped to give assistance. In addition, the in many of the African societies in which I have conducted interviews do fundamentally operate according to a logic of patronage, and any somewhat wealthy person would be viewed as a potential source of handouts or patronage. In that sense, not trying to get something out of any stranger would be considered a wasted opportunity by respondents.

This lingering expectations can usually be more easily dealt with in some situations than others. Frequently, highlighting what specifically the information collected is good for and how it will be used helps to avoid misunderstandings.

If open requests for assistance are made, being polite in declining the requests is the only way to avoid giving the impression that there is an implicit quid-pro-quo and raising undue expectations. I have received numerous demands to help respondents find employment and I know of a colleague who was given a CV by a respondent with the request to ensure that his/her son get into Harvard University. Explaining the limited role a researcher plays in those situations is the only possible response in such situation, but they do leave a lingering sense of awkwardness.

Information as commodity?

Even worse, than the above requests, in certain post-conflict counties, in particular in West Africa, there seems to be a certain commodification of information provided to researchers. Hence, one dilemma I frequently encounter doing research in war-torn and poverty-ridden West Africa is whether to give back to informants in a very direct way: by paying for information. In very poor conflict and post-conflict settings, everything can become a commodity, including information. Those with access to information or the production of information are often happy to cash in on their privileged position. On various occasions I have been asked more or less directly or through local intermediaries to make a contribution to their personal livelihood by journalists, academics, and ex-combatants who have become used to sharing their stories with researchers. I usually decline those requests politely offering a variety of explanations ranging from the fact that I am a graduate student and do not have a job (usually a hard sell in the eyes of the interlocutors) to principled appeals about the fact that in Western countries information is generally shared out of common interest. If the interlocutor insists, I have at time tried to find another way to pay them back, by inviting them to lunch, paying for transportation to come to the interview location, or once purchased a local journal with an article by the academic (for a somewhat inflated price).

Other informants, in particular local government officials, have also on occasion openly expressed the expectation that they be treated to lunch or dinner in exchange for information, which does not leave much choice to the researcher than to oblige, unless the informant is not considered key. I have also interviewed certain groups of ex-combatants who strongly suggested that I buy them some drinks during the interview, which I am usually happy to comply, even though it seems awkward if the impression is given that there is a quid-pro-quo. With respect to ex-combatants, there could be good reasons to comply with such requests, since refusal could easily turn into a security risk for the researcher. I know of a colleague who declined demands by ex-combatants for compensation and was subsequently deprived of his wallet by the numerically and physically stronger groups of former fighters.

This commodification of research and information sharing creates a real dilemma for post-conflict research. It seems like certain populations in post-conflict setting have gotten used to payments or some kind of compensation by researchers (or journalists – they often do not make a distinction). It seems unethical to pay for

information for research, but there might be certain individuals with key insights and information without whose account the analysis would be incomplete.

Conclusion

Key informant interviews with individuals from a wide range of backgrounds are central to establishing fine-grained causal accounts of the genesis, dynamics, and termination of conflicts as well as of processes that help or hinder post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding.

Recent research on the micro-elements of conflict have demonstrated how important key informant accounts are for the analysis, but also what the numerous challenges are in selecting informants, getting access, assessing the validity of information, and of navigating the multiple practical and ethical dilemmas inherent in a complex encounter between different cultures, traditions, and interests.

Central recommendations seem to be common sense for any kind of field research, but might be more crucial in conflict and post-conflict settings. They include the following:

Do your homework: Good preparation is crucial to avoid the numerous trap that lurk in the post-conflict field research. It is essential to know the parties to the conflict, their interests, positions, and discourses as well as have as detailed an idea of the conflict (or post-conflict situation) as possible to be able to assess who belongs to which camp and to avoid biases in selecting respondents. Starting field research in a conflict or post-conflict environment without the proper preparation might at best lead to incomplete and biased accounts or at worst put the entire research project or the researcher in danger if he or she is not aware of local political dynamics, sensitive issues and dangerous affiliations.

Use multiple data sources: Interviews, while a central source of information to establish ground-level causal accounts of war and peace, are in and of themselves rarely sufficient to draw valid inferences. Only embedded in a research strategy that relies on multiple data sources at different levels of analysis. Interviews unfold their full potential only in the context provide by existing analysis and other data sources rather than on their own (unless perhaps for those doing interpretive research).

Be compassionate, respectful and humble: Semi-structured interviewing is as much an art as it is a science and there is a good amount of learning by doing to hone one's interviewing skills. Interviews bring the researcher into contact with a large number of individuals who open their hearts and share their stories. It is important to appreciate the enormity of the trust that individuals place in the interviewer and it is of utmost importance that researchers do not betray that trust. Concern about respondents' safety and privacy should always be central on the interviewer's mind. No information is worth putting informants in danger. Patience, respect for other views, cultures, and practices and a good dose

of humility should go a long way in making the interview experience rich, fruitful and truly enjoyable for all sides.

Areas for further exploration for conflict and post-conflict researches include the influence of inevitable power differentials between researcher and respondent on the type of information obtained and on the subsequent analysis and the perennial dilemma of how to appropriately give back to the informants and their communities without raising undue expectations and without neither disappointing respondents nor corrupting the researcher-informant interaction for future researchers.

Finally, an issue I have not seen addressed in my (admittedly limited) review of some of the literature on research in conflict and post-conflict settings is the role of informal conversations that fall somewhere between participant observation and interviews. Often such informal encounters in public places, public transportation, on the street or in other random locations provide interesting contextual and sometimes even intriguingly detailed information. They may be too fleeting, though, to capture the name and contact of the informant and a notebook may not be at hand to write down the information. The moment and the informant thus come and go, but the information remains and, if intriguing enough, has occasionally shaped my thinking on certain questions. This is somewhat similar to the non-expert expert views mentioned above. It is unclear to me what role such informal accounts can play in the final analysis and how to properly record and account for such information.

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