

8 'That is not what we authorised you to do ... ': Access and government interference in highly politicised research environments

Susan M. Thomson

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the strategies used to gain access to potential respondents and to deal with government interference in my research project in Rwanda from April to October 2006. I had planned to spend one year in the field (April 2006 to April 2007) but the government of Rwanda revoked my letter of permission in September 2006. I spent a month with government officials, learning the 'true version' of how 'things really are in Rwanda' rather than 'wasting' my time talking to 'peasants' and 'unimportant people' who 'are all liars anyway'.¹ The Rwandan government took my passport, with a promise to return it once I had been 're-educated' about its initiatives to promote national unity and reconciliation in the wake of the 1994 genocide. Long before this official government interference, I had already traversed the uneven terrain of entering Rwanda, identifying two local partner agencies to sponsor the research, and had successfully gained access to the 'terribly closed' rural world of ordinary, peasant Rwandans.²

My research was based in Southern Rwanda as it is home to the largest pre-genocide Tutsi population, and remains demographically similar since the genocide.³ It is also home to a cross-section of individuals from each of Rwanda's three ethnic groups – Hutu, Tutsi and Twa. Few in Southern Rwanda had any direct experience of the mass killings of Tutsi prior to the 1994 genocide, making it an ideal site to consider government claims of historical unity as friends, family and neighbours had lived relatively peaceful until late April 1994 when the genocide started.⁴ Hutu and Tutsi living in the South also worked together to resist the genocide in its early days, but were eventually overcome by the well-oiled genocidal machine of the previous government.⁵ I also had prior knowledge of the region, when I lived in Butare town (now Huye) while employed with the United Nations (1997–98) and the United States Agency for International Development (1998–2001). Having lived in Rwanda for almost five years, I felt compelled to embark on research which could contribute to an understanding of how ordinary Rwandans made sense of the political and social processes of the post-genocide Rwandan state. The purpose was to allow ordinary Rwandans to express themselves as individuals, in their own words, as they seek to re-establish livelihoods,

re-constitute social and economic networks, and reconcile with neighbours, friends and, in some cases, family since the 1994 genocide.⁶

The first goal of this chapter is to provide an overview of the demands, difficulties and tactics used to gain access to highly politicized research sites such as post-genocide Rwanda. Thinking about issues of access at the design stage is essential as *how* you carry out your research, *whom* you talk to, and *what* you talk about can help you navigate intensely political environments where research is unlikely to be viewed by local actors as neutral, or altruistic. With knowledge of and continued sensitivity to local realities, researchers can mitigate the difficulties of identifying a representative sample and better assess the often biased or self-interested evidence compiled during fieldwork. I instantiate the importance of continued awareness of local realities in two concrete examples, one with a respondent and one with government, in the last part of the chapter.

My research took place within a context of discreet government surveillance as well as chronic violence and extreme human duress,⁷ which further limited my ability to gain access to the social spaces and enter the private locations where ordinary Rwandans live. It also involved extensive interviewing with a respondent pool that was difficult to access as few are willing to talk openly about their experiences during the 1994 genocide. Exacerbating access to potential respondents is the prevalence of emotional trauma among Rwandans – Hutu, Tutsi and Twa – who survived the genocide.⁸ My research also involved obtaining permission from the Rwandan government, and the need to identify and work with government-approved local partners.

The second purpose of the chapter is to explore government interference in the research process. Interference can take a variety of forms from the obvious milling about of a government official during an interview, to questioning and/or intimidating the respondent after the researcher has left about the content of the interview, to more direct obstacles, like failing to produce promised permissions documents, or openly misleading the researcher. In my case, the interference was subtle as a number of actors worked on behalf of the government to make sure I would 'write about only what I saw'. That the post-genocide government of Rwanda sought to obstruct my research did not surprise me, since it skilfully practices information management in eliminating virtually every form of dissent.⁹ I first discuss the tactics of interference that I identified towards the end of my fieldwork. I then explain the techniques employed to safeguard the identity of respondents, while assuring my safety as well as that of my research assistants in ways that protected the integrity of the research. I also consider the possible impact of government interference on my research findings, and suggest ways to deal with the possibility of interference when designing and implementing your research project.

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Research procedures*Permission to enter 'the field'*

Thinking about entering 'the field' requires some preliminary preparations before the researcher makes her descent. In addition to booking one's travel, procuring the necessary visas and vaccinations, and ensuring a secure place to stay upon arrival, there are a number of preliminary steps to think through, notably delimiting the field-site, establishing organizational ties and identifying potential respondents. Even projects grounded in participant observation as the primary method are buoyed by interviews and genealogical research that requires forethought and planning. How research is to be carried out, who will participate and how the material gained will be safeguarded and used are thought through for academics during the ethics process, and fine-tuned during fieldwork. Practitioners or development workers who undertake research as part of their job description may have a different set of constraints; for example, purpose-driven research for donors to assure continued funding of existing projects rather than the problem-driven research that academics tend to undertake. They are more likely to already have local partners in place, as their employment with an international organization or development agency explains their presence in the country. Regardless of the purpose of one's research, the support of the host government is often required, which makes knowledge, of what kind of research the government is willing to support, important and is best taken into account at the design stage.

In post-genocide Rwanda, as in many other countries in Africa, academics require permission from the highest level of government for three reasons. One, to allow governments to ensure that the research is appropriate to their development or peacebuilding agenda; two, as a way for the government to register and keep track of foreign researchers; and three, to provide a letter of introduction to government officials and local partner organizations who work with the researcher on a more regular basis during the period of fieldwork. My project required permission from the Ministry of Local Government (MINALOC), who authorized interview topics and informed local government officials that I had its permission to be in rural areas to talk to ordinary Rwandans. The research also included interviews and participant observation in several of Rwanda's prisons; speaking to prisoners required an additional letter of permission, addressed to the director of each prison I visited, from the Ministry of Internal Security (MININTER).

Before the government would even consider my request for a research permit, I first needed to identify a local partner who would 'sponsor' my research. I knew that my choice of partner would impact who I could talk to and how. For this reason, I decided to pursue partnerships with two local partners,¹⁰ one who I knew had close ties to government (partner A) while my other partner (partner B) had more autonomy and was even critical of

