

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

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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'.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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,<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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,<sup>10</sup> 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

government policy on occasion. I nurtured the relationships with both local partner organizations about 18 months prior to entering the field. We worked largely by e-mail. One of my partner organizations only had three computers for a staff of 27, meaning that most of our correspondence was by post with the occasional telephone call. Rwanda has reliable postal and telecommunications networks and this was never a hindrance. Both partner organizations have websites and before contacting them by e-mail to request that they sponsor my research, I researched their respective mandates, programmes and activities, target audience and beneficiaries. I also met with representatives of each organization in the diaspora and tried to learn as much as I could before approaching them. This knowledge was valuable as we negotiated the nature and scope of our partnership. In my initial letter to each organization requesting that I be taken on as a partner, I was able to show where my research dovetailed with their activities. My requests to partner with each organization were approved in late 2005.

My research about the life stories of ordinary Rwandans before, during and after the genocide was broadly in line with the type of research that the Rwandan government wanted to support. It took about a week to get the letter of permission from MINALOC, and the process required several face-to-face meetings with the personal assistant of the minister. The process was quick, with four to six weeks being the average length of time for the government to grant its permission. I attribute this to pre-fieldwork preparations, notably the choice to partner with a local organization that worked with foreign researchers on a regular basis. What I did not realize at the time was that my primary local partner, partner A, was charged with reporting back to the assistant to the minister at MINALOC about whom I spoke to in the field, and what we spoke about.

Surveillance appeared early in my relationship with partner A. Meetings with eight senior members of government, including two ministers and three senators, were 'necessary' before I could get to apply for a research permit from MINALOC. During these meetings, I presented each official with a list of interview topics, my *curriculum vitae* to show my ability to carry out the project, and a one-page overview of the research and its expected outcomes. The one-page overview included a paragraph on my chosen research partners and the nature of our relationship to show how we would work together and how each party would benefit from the partnership. Each meeting ended with the official waxing poetic on the success of the government in restoring peace and security since the genocide. I was reminded by everyone to keep regular contact with partner A, and not to believe everything people told me. Most interesting was the consistency of the message; there was virtually no variation in what each official told me. Even more interesting was the very different versions of the truth that arose as ordinary Rwandans were most willing (given the right introduction and conditions) to talk to me about their lives before, during and after the genocide. In highly politicized research environment, it is important to recognize the government's version of events, as well

as the narratives of other actors, and to understand how each version of the truth may impact fieldwork, notably accessing possible respondents and then interpreting the information they share with you. Knowledge of the government's consensus version about life in post-genocide Rwanda proved helpful during interviews as I began to recognize it when I heard it and was able to modify my interview technique accordingly, and in some cases abandon the interview altogether if it was yielding biased or partisan information.

During the first month of fieldwork it became apparent that my partner A contact was 'checking in' on me as he repeatedly suggested I not believe everything I heard from ordinary Rwandans, and asked numerous questions about how things were going with my conversations with 'unimportant people'. At first, I perceived this as small talk but eventually came to appreciate the role of his organization, as well as my own role, in Rwanda's information economy. Research involves making choices about which voices are heard and whose knowledge counts. The government was not necessarily interested in the life stories of all Rwandans; it was only keen on those voices that supported its vision. My contact at partner A understood this and I soon did as well, engaging in a cat-and-mouse game of trying to gauge what he wanted to hear during my reporting sessions, with what I was willing to tell them about what I was learning from my interviews with so many 'unimportant' Rwandans. My strategy was to tell him as little as possible, and to ask my respondents about the best ways to avoid having others – be it neighbours, government officials or civil society representatives like my contact with partner A – observe our conversations together. I did not try to hide the fact that my contact at partner A was asking about who was saying what. Instead, I shared with some of my respondents what partner A wanted from me, and asked them for suggestions on how to avoid telling him what was really being said. This usually resulted in a deepening of the interview relationship, as my respondents were delighted that I seemed to understand the constraints they were under in the daily lives and was willing to discuss how to avoid the glare of 'people who make decisions in Kigali that affect us out here [in rural Rwanda]. Those people in Kigali tell us what to do when they come here. You ask me what I think and I tell you. Then you tell me next time how you took my news to [partner A contact] in Kigali. It is very good'.<sup>11</sup>

### *Respondent recruitment*

None of the 37 individuals who agreed to participate in the research were identified through organizational contacts, although both the government and my local partners recommended that I do so. Instead, I accessed respondents principally through personal networks, ordinary people that I would meet at the market, walking in the hills or on the taxi-bus. I have a basic knowledge of Kinyarwanda, the sole language of more than 90 per cent of Rwandans, and was able to speak about everyday things, such as shopping in the market,

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asking about one's family or work, and ordering a drink at a local kiosk. I  
 also kept Kinyarwanda language books with me at all times, both as a  
 learning tool and to show that I was trying my best to speak to ordinary  
 Rwandans in their mother tongue.<sup>12</sup> I tracked potential respondents through  
 their social networks as everyday life in Rwanda, like rural areas in other  
 countries, is not confined to a geographical entity. Much like the footpaths  
 and back roads that link individual homesteads to one another, I choose to  
 follow the linkages between individuals.

In the early days of respondent recruitment and before agreeing to any  
 formal interviews, I spoke informally with many ordinary Rwandans about  
 their lives before, during and after the genocide. As the individual spoke, I  
 made, with permission, notes about the individuals she referred to. Individ-  
 uals spoke of family, friends, neighbours as well as their interactions with  
 government officials before and after the genocide. Some of the relationships  
 were positive, others negative. Regardless of the nature or quality of the  
 relationship, I tried to follow up with each of the named individuals. This  
 approach provided 167 names. I was able to contact 95 individuals of whom  
 37 agreed to participate. Many of my respondents said that they agreed to  
 participate in my research because I did not access them through organiza-  
 tional contacts and made an effort to meet them in the places 'where they  
 live' or 'in the fields where they work' (interviews, 2006).

My contact at partner A provided a list of names of people I was supposed  
 to interview. I still did not know at the time that my contact within my part-  
 ner organization was reporting back to MINALOC about the progression of  
 my research. As time passed, he became more interventionist in bringing  
 members of his organization to my residence to interview, usually in his pres-  
 ence, demanding to see my research notes, and offering to 'verify' the nar-  
 ratives of people he did not send to me as 'all Rwandans are liars'. After some  
 wrangling, in which I repeatedly refused to share even the names of my  
 respondents, let alone the content of our discussions, we agreed that I would  
 inform him of my interview schedule. My strategy was to share with him the  
 date of select interviews, but never the time. I then organized to meet  
 respondents very early in the morning, from 4am in some cases, in the rural  
 areas where they lived. Respondents were willing to speak with me early in  
 the morning. City-folk, such as my partner A contact or local government  
 officials, did not keep 'country-hours' and I never saw any officials during the  
 dawn hours, a point that was not lost on any of my respondents as they spoke  
 freely with me, pleased with the opportunity to speak to an outsider. The  
 words of one respondent are emblematic: 'It is good for me to talk to an  
 outsider like you because I can't share my stories with people around here'.<sup>13</sup>

Another sign of interference was the repeated requests from partner A for a  
 summary of what was being said by whom; as he became more forceful in  
 requesting the information, I was glad that several safeguards to maintain the  
 confidentiality of interview material were in place. Pre-fieldwork preparation  
 proved invaluable once again as I had already instituted a system of not

recording the names of respondents anywhere in my fieldnotes and of using a fresh notebook for each meeting, lest I lose the notes, or a local official ask to see them. Where a name might appear in an audio recording, I blanked out that section of the tape before transcription by a member of the research assistance team.<sup>14</sup> I also blanked out any information that could be used to identify a particular respondent, such as the names of relatives or friends, or associational memberships. These safeguards were taken to protect the anonymity of respondents in case the government wanted to see the interview notes, and also to ensure their confidence as part the trust-based relationship I shared with respondents. Meticulously following these safeguards meant that any backlash during the research process, or as a result of any publications that ensued from the research, would ensure that Rwandan government officials would be unable to locate individual respondents.

I eventually learned that partner A was concerned that respondents were making negative comments about the government, and could bring sanction against his organization. He was, after all, accountable to government for my actions. Once this concern became apparent, I interviewed the individuals he brought to my doorstep, treating them as a collective voice about the power dynamics between the government and civil society, but also between civil society organizations and their membership.<sup>15</sup> The circumscribed autonomy of partner A, and the way in which it impacted the research, provide important insights on the surveillance of foreign research projects and local power dynamics within civil society organizations in particular and the community level more generally. It also provided increased rapport with some respondents in the shared experience of dealing with local elites became a bonding one. For example, the rapport I shared with ordinary Rwandans, as well as the density of social networks in Rwanda, was confirmed when I met one of my respondents during a trip to the market. His sister's cousin was one of the individuals brought to my home by my partner A contact. She said that members of the organization in a community where some of my respondents live were told by my contact what they could and could not say during the interview. If the individual spoke on themes other than those 'authorized', the privileges of membership would be revoked, including loss of access to health care and support for school fees.

## **Gaining access**

### *Access to respondents*

I knew from my previous period of residence that it would not be easy to gain access to the personal lives of people who had their lives torn asunder by genocide. To facilitate access and to demonstrate my seriousness, I lived, as much as a white foreigner could, as ordinary Rwandans lived. I walked everywhere, and only took public transportation when I had to go any extended distance (I managed distances of less than 10 kilometres on foot; my

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translator for the day would often meet me at the agreed site rather than  
 walk). This gave me a certain cachet as it became evident to many people that  
 I was ready and willing to travel considerable distances to see them. Some of  
 the most revealing conversations were in the hills surrounding the valley  
 where I lived, where I walked every evening and met a broad cross-section of  
 ordinary Rwandans, some of whom were participating in the life history  
 aspect of the research. When I bumped into participants outside the formal  
 interview setting, I did not say hello unless they greeted me first. This was out  
 of respect for their privacy as questions about how and why we knew each  
 other could have arisen.

I anticipated that Rwandans would speak their minds when they felt secure  
 and comfortable. And speak they did; the life history approach resulted in 348  
 hours of raw interview material, with an average of 9.4 hours per respondent.  
 I was sensitive that some topics would have to go untouched. The approach  
 was to listen empathetically to what individuals deemed important, and not  
 to pry. I never pressed individuals to speak about things they did not want to  
 discuss; I proved my reliability with my awareness of and sensitivity to the  
 fact that there were people, things, and places I did not seek to know. The  
 close relationships that developed were a reaction to my interest in people's  
 understanding of and feelings about events and changes, in their lives, particu-  
 larly since the genocide. That I was only interested in what individuals were  
 willing to share and the fact that I had a permission letter from the govern-  
 ment minimized personal risk for respondents as my presence in communities  
 was officially sanctioned; respondents who agreed to participate in the  
 research understood its risks and some weighed this against the therapeutic  
 benefits of having a sympathetic outsider to talk to.

In fact, many individuals thought that if I a was researcher, and so inter-  
 ested in their lives as few before had been, then I must by definition be a  
 therapist. Most individuals were aware of the role of therapists since the  
 genocide as the post-genocide government had organized post-traumatic  
 stress counselling units for survivors of the genocide and for individuals who  
 needed emotional support following participation in the *gacaca* grassroots  
 justice courts. 'Therapist' was a role I could not escape, and many individuals  
 asked me during the long walks to and from interview sites if their behaviour  
 was 'normal', or confided to me their troubles and heartaches. This was an  
 added layer of stress for me as I spent most of my days listening to the nar-  
 ratives of individuals who survived the genocide, had been raped, or tortured,  
 or had witnessed killings, or who had killed. While personally difficult as I  
 sometimes took on the pain and suffering that individuals shared with me, the  
 therapist image also meant that the combination of my empathy and respect  
 made me privy to significant and intimate details of people's lives that could  
 have been otherwise unobtainable.



**Layers of surveillance, modes of interference: Two examples**

Two principal examples from fieldwork illustrate the demands of research in highly politicized environments and highlight the importance of continued sensitivity to local realities. The first example shows how an empathetic act can potentially threaten relationships with respondents and undo hard-earned trust and respect. In the second example, I discuss the experience of having my research permit withdrawn and share the strategies I used to assure my safety as well as that of my respondents.

***'What made you think you could touch her?'***

A condition of my research permit was the need to pay a visit to the local government official in each administrative centre the first time I visited the community in question. This was the norm, and I gladly paid these courtesy calls to present my letter of permission from the central government. Meeting local officials gave an air of respectability to the research, and respondents understood that I was serious about hearing their life experiences, which was further evidenced by my repeated visits at the agreed upon times at the agreed locations. As fieldwork progressed, and I met and spent time with more people, the importance of understanding alliances in Rwandan social life became more apparent, as the following example shows.

During a courtesy call at the administrative offices of a rural community about 40 kilometres southwest of Butare town, a woman whom I did not know was wailing uncontrollably and was screeching at the end of a long hallway of closed doors. Who or what was upsetting her was unclear. About ten minutes later, I was called in to meet the official I had come to see, and he asked me what was going on with this crying woman. I said I did not know as he ushered me out the door, having approved my request to conduct interviews with some of the residents in his bailiwick. I had expected my courtesy call to take much longer, and so I sat outside on a low wall to wait for one of my translators so we could walk the short distance to the agreed interview meeting place. Shortly after, the wailing woman was unceremoniously dumped outside, onto the concrete slab that served as the front entrance of the office block. She eventually stopped crying, laying prostrate and seemingly exhausted from whatever bad news she had just received. She eventually pulled herself together, and I gave her a meek smile as she walked past where I was sitting. There were about 15 Rwandans in attendance. I did not think about this event again, as incidences of heartbreak and sorrow such as the one I had witnessed were relatively commonplace.

The next week, I was back and was leaning on the same wall outside the offices of the local authorities as I waited for my translator to arrive. I was about 15 minutes early and the same woman who had been wailing the week before appeared. The government had organized a wake to symbolically rebury the bodies of those individuals from the area who had died during the

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1994 genocide. The government had instituted a new policy in early 2006 that local offices were to become the official repositories of the remains of genocide dead, officially as a genocide memorial, but also to control access to the memorials as some tombs were being broken into as people sought to bury even unidentified remains on their own land. The woman was upset because she believed her husband and two of her children were among the bodies to be reburied, and she had spent significant time and energy asking for their bones to be given to her so she could bury them 'properly' on their land. The wake was scheduled to start, and I slipped into the crowd to bear witness. The wailing woman of the previous week was standing two or three people in front of me, and I could see her hunched shoulders and hear her efforts to choke back tears. The ceremony lasted about 20 minutes, and as the crowd dispersed, the woman stood motionless over the new, official burial site. Soon, we were the only two standing before the gravestone. She sighed deeply and I put my arm around her shoulder and gave her a gentle squeeze to say 'sorry for your trouble'. She winced, and I pulled away. We stood silently over the gravesite for another 15 minutes or so. She left and I continued milling about, waiting for my now-late translator to arrive.

When I eventually arrived at the agreed upon interview location, the woman I was scheduled to interview was incensed: How could I have offered my support to her enemy? Didn't I know that her husband had been killed by the husband of that Hutu woman I touched? Didn't I know that the woman was making trouble at the offices of the local authorities? She thought I knew Rwandans better than that! I did not know much about this woman's life history as we had yet to have our first formal interview. Taken aback by the vehemence of her questioning, I offered to leave. Which raised her ire even more: 'So now my stories are not good enough for your project? I thought you cared about me. Ha, you are just like the authorities. You take what you need and then leave us [not clear who 'us' refers to]. I thought you were different ...'. I further explained that I had offered to leave as a sign of respect for her feelings. I explained that I did not know the woman in question but that I was truly sorry for her loss, just like I was sad and sorry for all that my respondent had suffered during and since the genocide.<sup>16</sup> We sat quietly together, and I held her hands in mine for about 20 minutes. She soon sat up straight, and we looked at each other in silence for a few minutes, and she went on to explain that I had to be more careful about who I spent my time with and to remember that I was an 'important person' (someone with social standing). We talked for a long time, well into the late afternoon, about her perceptions on government policy and how it keeps people apart rather than bringing them together. I was never sure of the nature of our 'alliance' (to use her word) after this, but I certainly understood that something important had happened as it became clear that this respondent expected me to defend her interests; she saw me as her ally, and in treating other Rwandans in what I perceived to be a similar situation in the same way, was revealing to me. In entering the private spaces of my respondents, I was not only revealing the

obvious inequalities between researcher and researched, but also began to open the door on the arbitrariness that constrained the lives of both women, my respondent and the stranger. Even a compassionate touch of the 'wrong' individual could bring unexpected negative consequences although in this case the incident resulted in a stronger relationship with this particular respondent. I never saw the woman that I met at the local office again although I did think of her whenever I saw a grave site, a regular occurrence in post-genocide Rwanda.

*'We don't need that kind of research'*

Part of my research design was to interview prisoners accused of genocide. I received the appropriate permissions from MININTER and began interviewing prisoners in early August 2006. My prior work with the UN also played a role here; I knew that the Director of Prisons for the local prison I was visiting would ask the head of prisoners (male and female) to identify individuals for me to interview. There was no question of informed consent in the prisons because of the power relationship between the prison administration and the prisoners themselves. I was supposed to submit a list of names of individuals that I wanted to interview. Instead, I asked for six individuals, three women and three men, who had confessed to their crimes and had already gone through the *gacaca* traditional justice process, as well as six individuals who had not confessed their crimes and were awaiting trial. As expected, the head of prisoners were brought to me and they identified several individuals who were willing to speak to me.<sup>17</sup> About three weeks into the process of meeting unnamed prisoners, the Director called me into his office to ask for a list of the names of the individuals who had 'agreed' to speak to me. I did not record anything except the necessary demographic details for each participant as a safety precaution; the focus was on recording the narrative. I suspect that the Director knew the names of each prisoner, but his insistence and my inability to share the names resulted in a summons from the Ministry of Local Government asking me to come to Kigali (the capital city) 'to discuss my research project'.

I sat outside the office of the individual who requested to see me for three days before I was called in to explain what I was doing interviewing 'Hutus about their experiences of genocide. We know what they did, and we don't need that kind of research'. I showed my research permit to the assistant of the minister, as well as the research summary and list of interview topics that supported my application for a research permit to show that I was well within the boundaries of what I was 'allowed' to do. The official suggested at this point that perhaps my research project 'be shut down' as it was clearly against government policy. It eventually emerged that the research looked too favourably among the experiences of prisoners, and that 'what I needed was to stop talking to ordinary people who were filling my head with negative ideas'. The official then told me to stop interviewing and I told them that I

and researched, but also began to constrain the lives of both women, with a compassionate touch of the 'wrong' consequences although in this relationship with this particular person that I met at the local office again at a grave site, a regular occurrence

new prisoners accused of genocide. I MININTER and began interviewing or work with the UN also played a role for the local prison I was visiting (male and female) to identify individuals and obtain informed consent in the prisons with the prison administration and the help of a list of names of individuals provided for six individuals, three women and three men, all of whom had already gone to trial, as well as six individuals who were waiting trial. As expected, the head of the prison identified several individuals who I spent weeks into the process of meeting with and then into his office to ask for a list of names 'agreed' to speak to me. I did not obtain biographic details for each participant while recording the narrative. I suspect that one of the prisoners, but his insistence and my lack of a summons from the Ministry of Justice in Kigali (the capital city) 'to discuss

who requested to see me for three days that I was doing interviewing 'Hutus' and I don't know what they did, and we don't have a research permit to the assistant of the Ministry and list of interview topics that I don't have a permit to show that I was well within my rights to do. The official suggested at this point that I 'be shut down' as it was clearly obvious that the research looked too suspicious to the prisoners, and that 'what I needed was to stop' were filling my head with negative thoughts about interviewing and I told them that I

would have to undergo 're-education'. My interviews with survivors continued, but all other interviews were stopped. My passport was taken away, with a promise to return it when my 're-education' was complete. The official also gave me a list of government officials in Kigali to see, and assigned a junior government official to escort me to five *ingando* (citizenship re-education) sessions and take me to seven *gacaca* court sessions so that I could observe 'the good work of the government in restoring peace and security' to Rwanda.<sup>18</sup> I was required to check in with this person every night; in turn he informed his superiors of what I was doing and who I was with.

When the government stopped my research, the safety of everyone associated with the research was a grave concern. I never felt that my physical safety was at stake as relations with the government remained cordial, if sterile throughout. I was deeply concerned for the safety of my respondents and my research assistants. I understood that the government considered my research findings to be potentially threatening. For that reason, I submitted to their plan of 're-education', and did exactly as my government handler asked me to do when asked. The process included a requirement of meeting senior members of the government, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). My handler gave me a list of names and phone numbers of the most senior of party officials from government, civil society and the private sector. I visited each one dutifully, expecting admonishment on every occasion. Usually, and somewhat surprising to me, very few of them knew why I was visiting and we often just chatted for a few minutes about my research. Some had heard of my 'situation' and were uninterested in receiving me. Others spoke for more than an hour about the accomplishments and achievements of the RPF in stopping the genocide and restoring peace and security 'to all of Rwanda'.

During these visits in Kigali, I was also able to visit the Canadian Embassy and request a new passport. That process took about four weeks, and I snuck out of Rwanda early one Sunday morning in October 2006. I took the bus from Butare to Kigali late Saturday afternoon, bought my ticket to Nairobi with cash, checked in at a five-star hotel under an assumed name, hopped in a taxi at 4.30am and checked in at the airport. I timed my departure to correspond with Rwanda's Patriotism Day celebrations, which I knew would be heavily attended by members of the security forces. I also thought I could leave once I got my passport, as the government knew I was stranded until they returned the document to me. There were no police checks from town to the airport, and the airport was on a skeleton staff, which did little to calm me until the aircraft successfully left Rwandan airspace.

### Surveillance and interference: Some reflections

My research, as evidenced by the two examples presented above, experienced both surveillance and interference from ordinary people and government officials alike. While embarrassed by my female respondent for not understanding the politically sensitive nature of alliances and status in a rural

community, I learned an important lesson about empathetic listening. Had I left the home of my respondent when I first felt the need to go, that could have negatively impacted on the outcome of my research. My hasty departure may have closed off access to the private lives of some of my respondents in a particular community. The main concern was not that I touched the wailing/mourning woman, but that I was insensitive to what it meant for my respondent. If I am offering support to her perceived enemy, then I had better offer at least that and more to her. Her reaction was more than traumatic, it was also evidence of the weak political and social position of Tutsi widows of the genocide. Fortunately, I was able to learn from this experience, and while the respondents' emotional safety (and perhaps mine) was at risk, there was never a concern of lasting enmity. This is an important consideration in polarized research settings and affirms the need to think about who you will interview and how at the research design stage while allowing for enough flexibility to adapt the research to suit local constraints. Another lesson is to engage tense situations with respondents and to prepare yourself to deal with such situations. Individuals who have lived through violence can exhibit strong reactions to seemingly compassionate acts in unexpected ways. Intense interviews on sensitive topics are gruelling for respondent and researcher alike and while it is necessary to accommodate the preferences of respondents, it is also important to protect yourself. I did this by trying to interview only in the mornings so that I could spend the afternoon recuperating if necessary.

The experience of having my research cut short impacted the research in a number of positive ways. First, in offering to 're-educate' me, the government actually availed a frontline look at the tactics and techniques it uses to control Rwanda's political and social landscape. Initial feelings of fear, both for my physical safety and that of my respondents, soon subsided to a sense of privilege of being able to spend so much time in the company of Rwandan élites. Since my research was grounded in the voices of ordinary Rwandans, I quickly recognized the sweeping generalizations and over simplifications of Rwandan history that the government relied upon to legitimize its rule, which allowed me to further contextualize and situate the narratives of my respondents. The government's attempt to influence my thinking on its reconstruction and reconciliation successes since the 1994 genocide was equally revealing as I was able to see first hand how the government organizes the flow of information, and determines what counts as the 'truth' in post-genocide Rwanda. Talking to Rwandan élites was not part of my research design, but listening to them speak positively influenced my research in the end. Government interference and surveillance is likely in intensely political research sites such as post-genocide Rwanda and it is important to listen to as many possible view points from a broad cross-section of actors. Indeed, awareness of multiple view points is helpful in understanding and interpreting the individual 'truths' that people share with you, as is the ability to compare and contrast these alternate versions with the dominant version of the truth.

about empathetic listening. Had I first felt the need to go, that could have been a key part of my research. My hasty departure from the lives of some of my respondents in a way that was not that I touched the wailing/ crying to what it meant for my respondents as a perceived enemy, then I had better offer an explanation that was more than traumatic, it was the special position of Tutsi widows of the genocide. From this experience, and while the lives of some (as mine) was at risk, there was never a more important consideration in polarized environments. Think about who you will interview and be allowing for enough flexibility to adapt to the situation. Another lesson is to engage tense situations and be yourself to deal with such situations. Violence can exhibit strong reactions in unexpected ways. Intense interviews with respondents and researcher alike and respect for the preferences of respondents, it is also important to try to interview only in the field when recuperating if necessary. A short impact on the research in a way that was to 're-educate' me, the government's policies and techniques it uses to control the initial feelings of fear, both for my respondents, soon subsided to a sense of pride in the company of Rwandan elites. The voices of ordinary Rwandans, I tried to avoid generalizations and over simplifications of the situation upon to legitimize its rule, which helped to situate the narratives of my respondents and influence my thinking on its reconstruction of the 1994 genocide was equally important to understand how the government organizes power and what counts as the 'truth' in post-genocide Rwanda. Elites was not part of my research but it heavily influenced my research in the field. Balance is likely in intensely political environments like Rwanda and it is important to listen to a broad cross-section of actors. This is helpful in understanding and sharing with you, as is the ability to negotiate versions with the dominant version of

The insights and knowledge gained during my 're-education' also provided a source of solidarity between some of my respondents and me. The embedded nature of the life history interview method meant that I had spent considerable time over several months getting to know people, listening to life stories and sharing everyday experiences with them, and word spread quickly that I was no longer allowed to work. None of my respondents were surprised with the news, most of whom would pass by my residence to pay a visit, as is the custom in Rwanda. This surprised me as I had expected respondents to keep their distance, given my precarious situation. More than half of my respondents visited me at home, and several sent their hellos. I was heartened by the continued interest of many respondents in the research despite the obvious interference of the government.

The many steps I had taken during the design phase of my research and the modifications I made early on in my fieldwork to assure that each of my respondents understood the purpose of the research, and its attendant risks, before agreeing to participate paid off when my work was halted. Several respondents shared with me that they were proud to be part of a project that the government recognized as critical of its policies. This spoke to individual convictions for the research, and verified that the consent they had accorded at the outset of the research was still valid. This was an important lesson as it raised questions about the validity of informed consent over an extended period of time in politically volatile environments. Had my respondents reacted differently to the news that the government was stopping my research, I could have confronted a situation where the majority, if not all, of my respondents withdrew their consent in the final days of the project.

### Conclusion

This chapter has shown that research in highly politicized research environments is both necessary and possible with forethought and planning that takes into consideration local realities from a variety of perspectives. A sense of humility is a useful starting point as is maintaining a sense of flexibility in adapting to field conditions. Equally important is the need to identify how the local information economy operates as this directly impacts access to both the field site and to possible respondents. Maintaining good working relationships with actors on all sides of the political divide is also important. The strategies I employed during fieldwork, notably my efforts to gain the trust and protect the safety of my respondents were thought out prior to entering the field and tweaked to local conditions during fieldwork. The primary lesson of the chapter is that research in highly politicized environments must be grounded in a nuanced understanding of local conditions, and in awareness of whom to talk to, how to speak with them and on what topics.

## Notes

- 1 Fieldnotes, Rwanda 2006.
- 2 Danielle de Lame, *A Hill Among a Thousand: Transformations and Ruptures in Rural Rwanda* (Helen Arnold, trans. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), p. 14.
- 3 Alison DesForges, *Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999), pp. 432, 489, 592.
- 4 The genocide started in Kigali, the capital city, on the night of 6 April 1994. The killing started in Southern Rwanda almost two weeks later, around 21 April 1994. See DesForges, *Leave None to Tell the Story*, pp. 438–439. For analysis of how the genocide unfolded across the country and its local dynamics, see Scott Straus, *The Order of Genocide: Race, Power, and War in Rwanda* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), pp. 65–94.
- 5 DesForges, *Leave None to Tell the Story*, pp. 494–499.
- 6 Research on the politics of ordinary, peasant people is the exception rather than the rule in Rwanda. See David Newbury and Catharine Newbury, 'Review Essay: Bringing the Peasants Back In: Agrarian Themes in the Construction and Corrosion of Statist Historiography in Rwanda', *American Historical Review*, vol. 105 (2000), pp. 832–878.
- 7 On government surveillance and the broader political context and related human suffering, see, for example, Jennie E. Burnet, *Genocide Lives in Us: Amplified Silence and the Politics of Memory in Rwanda* (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Department of Anthropology, unpublished doctoral dissertation, 2005), particularly pp. 205–260; de Lame, *A Hill Among a Thousand*, particularly chapter 1; Human Rights Watch, *Uprooting the Rural Poor in Rwanda* (London: Human Rights Watch, 2001); International Crisis Group, *Rwanda at the End of the Transition: A Necessary Political Liberalisation?* (Nairobi: ICG, 2002). The reports of Human Rights Watch ([www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org)) and the UN's Integrated Regional Information Network ([www.irinnews.org](http://www.irinnews.org)) are also useful.
- 8 Ndayambajwe found that 95 per cent of his sample exhibited symptoms of trauma or post-traumatic stress. See Jean Damascène Ndayambajwe, *Le Génocide au Rwanda: Un analyse psychologique* (Butare: Université Nationale du Rwanda/Centre Universitaire de Santé Mentale, 2001), pp. 17–24. The psychosocial unit of AVEGA, the main organization working with women survivors of the genocide, estimates that 78 per cent of their beneficiaries show symptoms of trauma (Author's interviews, Rwanda 2006).
- 9 Johan Pottier, *Re-Imagining Rwanda: Conflict, Survival and Disinformation in the late 20th Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), particularly pp. 9–52 and 109–129; and Filip Reyntjens, 'Rwanda, Ten Years On: From Genocide to Dictatorship', *African Affairs* vol. 103 (2004), pp. 177–210.
- 10 I do not identify my local partner organizations by name for fear of creating problems for my research respondents, my research assistants or representatives of the organizations.
- 11 Author's interview, Rwanda 2006.
- 12 Christian M. Overdulse, *Apprendre la langue rwandaise* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1975); Eugène Shimamungu, *Le Kinyarwanda: Initiation à une langue bantu* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998).
- 13 Author's interview, Rwanda 2006.
- 14 I relied on the assistance of four translators/transcribers, all of whom were unknown to each other. As an additional safeguard, each member of the assistance team signed a written contract attesting that they would do their utmost to safeguard the narratives of each individual whose voice they were translating.

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 lison: University of Wisconsin Press,

ory: *Genocide in Rwanda* (New York:  
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 feguard, each member of the assistance  
 at they would do their utmost to safe-  
 se voice they were translating.

- 15 Civil society in Rwanda has been co-opted by government, and its mandate is broadly to implement the government's development agenda. See, for example, Chris Maina and Edith Kibalama (eds), *Civil Society and the Struggle for a Better Rwanda. A Report of the Fact-finding Mission to Rwanda organised under the auspices of Kituo Cha Katiba* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 2006).
- 16 At this point, I dispatched my translator to bring a phone card so that the respondent could call a trauma counselor if the respondent wanted to do so. She was exhibiting the tension and anxiety of a person in the midst of a traumatic episode. I had organized with partner B to give a list of names and phone numbers to persons who had their trauma triggered as a result of our conversations.
- 17 The life history interview allowed prisoners to speak in their own voice about the conditions of their detention. The information gathered was qualitatively different than that gathered outside as the interview setting was more sterile, and was certainly surveilled as we sat in a dark corner in the room outside the Director's office.
- 18 Fieldnotes, Rwanda 2006.