THE STORY BEHIND THE FINDINGS:
ETHICAL AND EMOTIONAL CHALLENGES OF FIELD RESEARCH IN CONFLICT-PRONE ENVIRONMENTS

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Abstract
Academic scientific literature rarely gives an account of the 'stories behind the findings'. Nonetheless, the ethical and emotional challenges the researcher is confronted with have a profound impact upon the research process. This paper provides a comprehensive review of literature reflecting upon the challenges of field research in conflict-prone environments. It reflects upon the researcher – informant interaction, and the challenges in working with local research assistants. The paper further engages in a deconstruction of risks faced by the researcher when operating in the field; and identifies how the codification of the researcher's identity and behaviour made by the local environment influences the research process. In a final part, the paper reflects upon whether a researcher is obliged to strive for objectivity and detachment, or whether one should be allowed to choose - maybe even aim - for subjective emotional engagement.

Key words: field research, conflict, micro-level, literature review

INTRODUCTION

Academic scientific literature rarely gives an account of the 'story behind the findings'; the ethical and emotional challenges the researcher is confronted with before, during and after the presence in the field. Nonetheless, these 'quagmires' (term of Ellis, 1995) have a profound impact upon the research process. This paper concentrates on the ethical and emotional challenges that characterise micro-level field research in conflict-prone environments. 'Micro-level' research entails an intense contact between researcher and informant. Fujii (2008: 2) elaborates on the particular challenges of such research, pointing to the moral obligation to protect participants by assessing their interests "through a contextually-specific and long-term lens". When this lens is characterised by conflict and fear, this responsibility becomes even heavier. 'A conflict-prone environment' refers to a context in which the researcher - and informant - is confronted with societal and personal fear and insecurity - possibly combined with active or latent violence. Such situations may manifest themselves in a war, pre-war, or post-war context characterised by high- or low-intensity conflict at a macro-scale. But the conflict-aspect

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may also occur at a micro-scale resulting in hidden or more open forms of fear and suspicion between and among local social groups.

Many decisions have to be taken before, during and after engaging in the conflict-prone field site. A researcher has to determine which methodology to adopt; how to identify potential informants and how to approach them; how to protect data and ensure confidentiality; and how to stick to the "do no harm" ethic of empirical research. At some universities, researchers are obliged to present their research design to an ethics committee. This urges them to think in advance about ethical challenges they could or will encounter in the field. Equally important however, is to assess ex-post how ethical and emotional challenges in the field influenced the empirical research process and determined the position of the researcher in the complex and hybrid societal dynamics.

This paper provides a comprehensive review of literature regarding challenges for field research in conflict-prone environments. It first focuses on the researcher – informant interaction (section 1). It reflects upon the ethical obligation of researchers to minimise the risks faced by the local population, in particular the informants directly involved in the research. We further focus on researchers' strategies to gain access to the field, earn trust of informants, and to distinguish between truth and lies in respondents' narratives. The paper then looks at the interaction between the researcher and his collaborators (section 2). We reflect upon the researchers' moral responsibility to protect the security of research assistants and point to the importance of trustworthiness of these collaborators. The paper continues with a deconstruction of risks and emotions faced by the researcher him/herself when engaging in the field (section 3). We also identify how the codification and interpretation of the researcher's identity and behaviour made by the local environment influences the research process (section 4). In a final part, the paper reflects upon whether a researcher is obliged to strive for objectivity and detachment, or whether one should be allowed to choose - maybe even aim - for subjective emotional engagement (section 5). In the conclusion, we reflect upon the importance for researchers to unveil 'their stories behind the findings'.

1. TRUST AND TRUTH: PROTECTING AND INTERACTING WITH INFORMANTS

The first question arising when setting up a research project is to select a particular research focus and field setting. Motivations to select one focus or setting over another may vary hugely; this is in fact the first stage where a 'researcher bias' steps in. A researcher's choice may be predetermined by security risks that impose restrictions upon the researcher's mobility. Danger and violence may oblige researchers to stick to reachable settings (see e.g. Nordstrom, 1995 on 'runway anthropology'; or Kalivas, 2004 on the urban bias in research on civil wars); or may oblige the researcher to work through and even 'associate' with a governmental or non-governmental 'partner'. This obviously compromises an 'independent attitude' towards the local setting. Swedenburg refers to the usual assumption 'that the field is virgin territory' for a researcher, whereas in reality the selection of a setting is often driven by rather 'unacademic' pre-existing relations, emotions and attachments (Swedenburg, 1995).

Indeed, entering the field implies setting up personal ties. This requires **building up trust**, and gaining access to people's personal spheres. Norman (2009: 72) points to the multifaceted character of trust, identifying how "multiple trusts […] may ebb and flow in the context of different individual and collective relationships". An important aspect of gaining trust is to develop and show empathy towards the informants. In some cases this may be extremely hard. What if one studies the oppressor, the villain, the torturer, the people who kill and massacre for a

living? This exact dilemma posed itself to Civico (2006:131) who made a portrait of paramilitary leaders engaged in the Colombian conflict. He wondered whether it is "possible to have benevolent feelings for someone whose ideas and deeds I not only disapprove but whom I also despise and abhor forcefully". Jipson and Litton (2000:154-155) highlight that empathizing with informants is not the same as sympathizing: "to empathize means that the researcher understands the nature of the belief system, while to sympathize conveys acceptance of the ideology".

Most often, however, research in conflict-prone environments focuses on people who are at least partly victimised by that environment. In such context, gaining trust is often a matter of getting behind the 'façade of normalcy' that is characterised by silence, secrecy and self-censorship (Green, 1995). Nordstrom (1995: 139) arguments in the same line that the louder the story in a context of violence and war, "the less representative […] the lived experience" whereas "silenced stories at war's epicenters are generally the most authentic". Silence may be circumvented through the adoption of disguised strategies: myths, jokes and songs may be 'palimpsets of meaning' in discourses on war and violence. Scott (1995) refers to 'hidden transcripts' that allow subordinate population groups to express their dissent in 'disguised' ways. These hidden transcripts allow insiders to convey resistance in seemingly meaningless ways for those not in the know. But researchers often are among the latter group; it takes time and efforts from the researcher in building up trust to move beyond this phase.

But while building up personal ties and trust that facilitate the researcher-participant interaction, field research exposes the local population – informants in particular – to **explicit and implicit risks**. At extremely distressful times people may let their masks fall off, expressing themselves openly but at the same time exposing themselves to considerable danger. Olujic (1995) for example describes how outsider journalists pushed women in the Croatian conflict into telling their rape stories, which enhanced their traumatisation, social isolation, and even resulted in some women committing suicide. Indeed, dependent upon the context, the inherent taboos, and the conduct of the researcher himself, participating in empirical research may either have a therapeutic effect, but can also turn into an extended traumatizing experience.

All the same, participation in research can expose people to explicit danger, certainly in conflict-prone environments. Peritore (1990) rightfully points to the difficulty for respondents to assess in advance the true extend of risks they face when participating in research, given that they often dispose of too little information to foresee the potential implications. Therefore, the researcher himself has a large responsibility to consider and minimize the 'ethical dangers' (Meyer, 2007) – both physical and emotional risks - to which informants could be exposed throughout and after empirical research. He or she should be aware that despite a momentarily presence in the field, the issues and discussions provoked may have long-term consequences (Kuzmits, 2008).

On the other hand, the risks for informants are often difficult to be assessed and predictably the researcher (Lee-Treweek & Linkogle, 2000). There are therefore certain minimal guidelines to keep in mind. Minimizing ethical danger starts with giving potential participants maximal information and by **passing a degree of control** to the informant. This may be done through clearly introducing the concept of consent – and the possibility to refuse to participate - at the start of the research process. Norman (2009) refers to consent as a way to build up *cognitive* trust. Wood (2006) materialised the "Do no harm" imperative by providing participants – next to a consent protocol - with the possibility to withdraw themselves *and all information previously provided* from the research. She facilitated the possibility for interviewees to reach and complain to the institutional review board of her university through local intermediaries.

Consent may however turn out to be a relative concept given that participants' willingness to share information with the outside world often depends upon the mood of the informant. Skidmore (2006) expresses her frustration of having to tear up field notes at the request of her informants who 'would spend sleepless nights' after their mutual conversation. Daniel (2000) for example recollects how a woman told him the story of her father being viciously killed by the army, first asking him to let the world know what they did to her father; but later in the interview asking him to never tell the story to anyone as she did not want his legacy to be dishonoured through the image of his mutilated body. Linkogle (2000) explains how her participatory research in a crowded week-long festival made consent simply impossible. Such anecdotes illustrate that obtaining consent may not be straightforward.

Moreover, basing trust merely upon consent procedures may be insufficient in a conflict context where rules and agreements are frequently violated. Norman (2009) therefore points to the importance of emotional trust, depending upon personal relations. Hays-Mitchell (2001) recounts how she tried to alleviate suspicion and fear related to her presence by organising a 'party for women' instead of the planned research-related 'meeting for women'. Norman explains how she spent quite some time in coordinating a small community project that had nothing to do with her research but allowed her to build up relational trust. Building up trust through intense and long term personal involvement also facilitates the researcher to assess the risks with which informants may be confronted (Norman, 2009). At the same time, building up this kind of trust may be very complex in a conflictuous context. Skidmore (2006:49) for example explains how the bonds she built up with her Burmese respondents often "snapped under the weight of fear and anxiety" each time she left the field, "carrying the secrets of frightened people". Long-term engagement with research participants may partly mitigate the problem. But prolonged interaction with research respondents may result in the 'fatigue syndrome' where respondents become increasingly annoyed with the presence and questions of the 'outsider' researcher (Belousov et al., 2007).

Another way to minimize the anxiety of informants and the risks to which they are exposed is by guaranteeing **confidentiality and anonymity** to participants. Moreover, this confidentiality often has to be extended to the whole community, given that in small-scale societal contexts, it may be rather easy to track down who said what once the research environment is known (Fujii, 2008). Guaranteeing confidentiality and anonymity is a well-known practice in social research, certainly in difficult environments. But the practical organisation is not always straightforward. Wood explains how she 'disguised' her collected field data when having to go through military checkpoints. Sluka (1990) recounts how he took precautions when expecting a raid on his house by Security Forces towards the end of his fieldwork in Catholic ghettos in 1982 Belfast. Thomson (2009) also took very careful precautions to hide the identities of her respondents. Her firm conviction to protect these identities eventually compromised the research project. Her research was shut down, her passport was taken away, and she was told to undergo a 're-education' in line with the Rwandan government's truth.

Informants do not only have to be protected against outsiders (whether formal authorities or others), but also from each other. Green (1995: 105) reveals how in conflictuous environments, "fear divides communities through suspicion and apprehension, not only to strangers, but of each other". This fear has a devastating impact upon the social fabric and makes silence, secrecy and self-censorship 'a second nature'. During her research on widow's stories in 1989 Guatemala, the surveillance and fear in the village made that people did not want 'the *gringa* to be seen coming to their house'. Fear to participate in research may not only be the result of already present societal dynamics inherent to the conflict-prone context; the research project itself may

add new tensions. Fujii (2008) for example lines out how jealousies may arise within the local population between those included and those excluded in the research. She tried to overcome this by adopting maximal transparency on the details of the research project and by avoiding handing out rewards to informants.

Indeed, the matter of giving **rewards** (or not) is an important ethical dilemma. Some researchers choose to pay participants for their involvement in the research. A rather extreme case is to involve informants in remunerative field research experiments, of which the financial output depends upon individual decisions and collective attitudes of local actors during the experiment (see e.g. Henrich, J. et al, 2004). Such experiments may profoundly uproot the societal fabric and expose local participants to considerable risks that can have an impact upon their personal lives and social networks long after the researcher has gone.

Rewards do not necessarily have to be material as the research project may involve non-material 'gains' for participants. Wood (2006: 382) for example saw her role of 'engaged listener' as some sort of service that she provided to the rural residents. Civico (2006:143) agrees that "there is a sense of reciprocity in this dynamic of sharing ad listening in which the character of a story might seize the opportunity to order ideas, incidents and images". Thomson (2009) refers to how participants themselves appropriated her as a researcher, trying to transform her into a kind of moral 'ally' who is expected to defend their interests. Kuzmits (2008) had a similar experience when he was 'taken hostage' for two days by community representatives who 'nearly suffocated [him] in hospitality' in the hope he would come up with solutions to their problems.

Gaining trust and protecting research informants from implicit and explicit risks, are not the only issues that matter in interaction with informants. Making a value judgement on **subjective and potentially conflicting discourses** is another great challenge. Wall (2008) brings all possible forms of 'subjectivity' together in a categorisation of three types. Situational subjectivity refers to the way in which a person's societal position (economic, social, political, familial) defines his worldview upon which his narratives are based. In case of reactive subjectivity, respondents adapt their narratives and behaviour once they capture that they are being studied. Protectionist subjectivity, finally, makes the respondent adapts his narratives to a politically correct version to protect himself from danger, perceived danger, or a 'loss of face'.

Reflecting upon protectionist subjectivity, Wall observed in the authoritarian context of Uzbekistan how respondents deliberately aligned to the 'official story' to keep themselves out of trouble. Ingelaere comments on a similar problem of 'knowledge construction' in the context of post-1994 Rwanda. He observes how "a particular ideological framework is widely propagated in the countryside [which] has installed a far-reaching self-censorship among the population with regards to elements that do not fit into the official 'public transcript'" (Ingelaere, 2009:13). He reports on how the 'rehearsed consensus' dominates the discourse from the top to the bottom of society and strongly affects field research.

Reactive subjectivity is often strongly related to the identity, conduct and reactions of researchers, playing a large role in the degree of truth embedded within the narratives of informants. Landau (1996) for example reflects on Mr. M's story that he could identify as a false narrative. In his reflection he does however recognise his own role of pushing M. into that direction. Ellis – reflecting on her research in a Fishermen community - concludes in the same way: "In a population in which tall talks are the norm, how would I know when I was getting the 'truth'? And didn't I egg them on, wanting more stories of the bizarre?" (Ellis, 1995:93) Robben (1995) points to the importance of seduction in field research on violent conflict, used as a

strategy by both victims and perpetrators. He defines seduction as a conscious or unconscious attempt of informants 'to divert us from our investigative aims by disarming our critical gaze'. Seduction is a personal and social defence strategy that tries to bias the researcher's interpretation of 'truth'.

Fujii (2010) adds to this insight by pointing to the artificial division between 'fact' and 'fiction'. She asserts that the value of a person's narratives should not necessarily be judged in terms of truthfulness, but in terms of underlying meaning that the person assigns to particular parts of reality. She assesses the made-up story of one of her respondents as a way 'to make sense of her current situation' and to recover her dignity, "not a story of what was, but rather, what should have been" (Fujii, 2008:13). This relates to Wall's concept of situational subjectivity. Indeed, different truths may be based on an "honest interpretation based on different memory and experience of the same events" (Sanford, 2006: 28). Sanford highlights how "one's location on a given trajectory of meaning [dependent upon the status of being survivor, perpetrator, bystander, outsider] determines one's structure of understanding – which ultimately shapes the contours of 'understandable' truth" (Sanford, 2006:21). Indeed, this 'structure of understanding' determines how a person absorbs and processes the 'truth'. But at the same time, the trajectories of meaning are always in motion and therefore the contours of 'truth' continuously shift at the individual and collective level.

Taking all together, it is clear that the way to assess and analyse conflicting narratives remains a huge dilemma to the researcher. Fujii (2010) points to the importance of combining analysis of conflicting narratives with meta-data, defined as rumours, inventions, denials, evasions and silences. This may help researchers to read the 'different shades of truth and lies' encountered in the field. Indeed, also other authors have pointed to the importance of meta-data (without referring to the concept as such). Simons (1995) for example indicates how during the outburst of street violence in 1989 Mogadishu, "information that came in the form of rumor was often treated as knowledge and, in a sense, became knowledge" (Simon, 1995:53). Certainly in conflict-prone environments, researchers are often confronted with rumours and gossip as one of the only streams of information that keeps on being produced in violent situations. Assessing and rightfully contextualising this information is a huge challenge.

Daniel (2000:347) wonders: "In writing about a people whose lives have been anything but whole or complete, how does one even determine the appropriate magnitude of one's representation of their lives, let alone presume the possibility of concordance among representations and the correspondence of one's representation with the represented?". Wall (2008) highlights the importance of triangulation and cross-checking of empirical data. Veldwich (2008:167) even takes this to a higher level by pleading for methodological triangulation, "combining methods that are connected to different ontological positions, […] which provides the opportunities of shifting between different interpretations of the same processes". Such methodological triangulation could be an interesting – though complex - strategy for micro-level researchers working in conflict-prone environments.

2. WORKING WITH RESEARCH ASSISTANTS

When engaging in field research – certainly in difficult environments – researchers often depend upon local research assistants for practical organisation, translation, and even interpretation of the data. The moral and ethical responsibility to protect people's **security** involved in the empirical research holds as much for informants as for research assistants and partners. Brian du Toit (cited in Fujii, 2008) was for example obliged to actively protect the identity of his research

assistant when being stopped by two policemen. Paluck (2009) - for her research in Rwanda and eastern DRC - worked in close collaboration with an extended research team and an NGO. She faced different ethical challenges in both contexts with regards to security matters. In DRC, she associated herself much closer with the NGO, which enhanced trust in the research team and which provided them with strict safety procedures in case of open violence. In Rwanda she made sure to "respect the appropriate speech (and appropriate silence)" to protect the NGO's reputation in a context of extended surveillance and state control, while keeping more distance from that same NGO to avoid opening up a space for government interference.

Next to security of research assistants, there is however also the matter of **reliability and trustworthiness** of research collaborators. In the ideal case, research assistants can function as 'cultural advisors' who make the researcher acquainted with local customs, cultural practices and narratives (Kuzmits, 2008). Gleisberg (2008) for example chose to work with non-professional local assistants with experience in agricultural activities (the focus of her research) and the same cultural background as her respondents. Despite many practical problems and a high interviewer turnover, she considered it a 'worthwhile experience' that improved the quality of her data collection process and helped her to better understand local conditions.

Next to practical problems – often related to cultural differences between researcher and assistant, there are two important issues that determine the reliability of collaborators. First of all, problems may arise at the level of the neutrality of the research assistant towards the research topic. Wagner (1996) for example indicates how she was forced to employ a research assistant who was identified by others as a security agent. But the trustworthiness of research collaborators in research may also be jeopardised through the way in which informants perceive the collaborators' identity. Paluck (2009) struggled with composing an 'ethnically representative team' to avoid that the research project would be associated with the Tutsi-dominant political elites. Nilan (2002) worked with a paid informant / facilitator when doing 'undercover' fieldwork in a nightclub in North Bali: she was considered as a client whereas her informant (indeed a young male sex-worker) was assumed to be her prostitute boyfriend by others in the nightclub. This gave her access to interesting data on local youth and the cultural constitution of health risks. She was however confronted with serious problems when the rumours of her having a prostitute boyfriend spread beyond the boundaries of the nightclub with a negative impact upon her access to other research arenas.

A second matter is up to which extent research assistants feel responsible for and **attached to the research**. Palmer (2008) pleads for giving a chance to local, not necessarily experienced people – in her case, this worked out extremely well with one of her collaborators. Paluck (2009) involved her research teams very actively through various initiatives of expertise exchange in the research preparation and execution phase. Wagner (1996) had a very different experience in Burundi where the research team handled the research topic for her as a *patron* while keeping a mental distance themselves; whereas the team in Tanzania became stakeholders in the research by 'adopt[ing] the project as their own' and by actively participating in the interviews. Gleisberg (2008) adopted a participatory approach to involve her collaborators in the project, but struggled with hierarchy and her identity as team leader / money bag. Indeed, managing a team that is temporarily set-up to undertake a difficult task may highly complicate field research.

All together, the identity, attitude and role of research assistants have a crucial impact upon the research process. Paluck rightfully points to the underreporting or total negligence of the role of these 'ghosts in the machine' (concept from Ryle 1949, cited by Paluck, 2009). She recommends researchers to value but also evaluate the role of research assistants, which can only be done if

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the researcher himself is present in the field and thus intimately engaged in all decisions on methodological, ethical and emotional challenges that research assistants face in their interaction with the field.

3. RISKS AND EMOTIONS FACED BY THE RESEARCHER

Once the whole research framework has been defined, actual field research in a conflict-prone context may be perturbed by many practical and security challenges faced by the researcher himself. Research puts researchers in a position where they have to manage risks to minimize the chance of real danger, while at the same time dealing with the emotions this entails. The difference in definitions of what is 'risky' versus what is 'dangerous' continuously shift, depending upon the time, context, position, and personal boundaries of the researcher (Peterson, 2000). In fact, perceptions of risk are part of a cultural construction (Adams, quoted in Peterson, 2000). But the ways to deal with (perceived) risk and uncertainty are often underacknowledged in the set-up of research projects. Meyer (2007) highlights how current research ethics mainly concentrate on the risks to which informants are exposed (ethical dangers), whereas ignoring the importance of risks faced by the researcher himself.

On the one hand, risks and relative non-safety may open a window of opportunities for groundbreaking field research. Wood (2006) specifies how she preferred areas contested by armed insurgents over research settings of uncontested government control or settings fully controlled by the insurgent army. Only in these contexts could she raise the politically sensitive questions that her research required, making use of the political and military stalemate that resulted in a vacuum in which nor the government, nor the armed insurgents exerted full control. Paluck (2009) also reflects upon the difference between on the one hand a context of relative security under firm state control (Rwanda), versus on the other hand a context of instability and insecurity but with very little interference in the research process (Goma, Eastern DRC). Her anecdotes illustrate how the insecurity in Eastern DRC imposed certain constraints (having to flee at certain times), but also offered opportunities to touch upon sensitive topics not debatable in the state-controlled context of Rwanda. Westmarland (2000) takes the debate beyond the contextual level, pointing to the way in which danger may give the researcher a better insight into informants' worlds through the experience how risk impacts on their lives. Olujic (1995) for example relates on the communal experience of war and fear in which she took part when hiding with others in bomb shelters. Nilan (2002) had a similar the experience of psychological bonding when living through the 1999 riots in Singaraja (North Bali) together with her research population. But on the other hand, the confrontation of the researcher with different forms of risks and danger may be perturbing. A deconstruction of the overall risk aspect may help the researcher to define personal boundaries.

Physical danger may result from 'ambient risks', related to the inherent danger of the research setting; or from 'situational risks' evoked by the researcher's presence or actions within the research setting (Sampson & Thomas 2003, citing Lee 1995). Ambient risks are inherent to a context of conflict, suspicion, fear and / or violence that often characterises conflict-prone environments. Nonetheless, researchers have the great advantage of choice: they have the freedom to leave, to come and go (Hays-Mitchell, 2001). Nordstrom (1995:140) for example refers to her research project on the Mozambiquian war as "runway anthropology", being "confined to locations where a landing strip and a security clearance could be eked out" which allowed her to follow the ebb and flow of the war.

In comparison with ambient risks, situational risks are rather linked to the identity of researchers (f.e. nationality cfr. Peritore 1990; or gender cfr. Winkler writing on her being raped, 1995). Such danger may in some cases be engendered by the attitude of the researcher himself. Meyer for example refers to the danger incorporated in 'tales of bravery' and the rush towards results, which may blur researchers' judgement on health and safety matters. Lecocq cynically comments: "Even talking about severe illness or other dangers is often done with the self assured attitude of someone capable of facing Armageddon and getting out alive. Apparently, Indiana Jones does exist" (Lecocq, 2002:274).

Managing risks and dealing with difficult circumstances obviously results in emotional reactions and potentially entails **emotional danger**. As rightfully pointed out by Meyer (2007), the emotions of researchers receive very little attention in the set-up of a research project. Nonetheless, Lecocq (2002: 273) illustrates how "the personal emotional experience and state of mind during fieldwork have an impact on the way fieldworkers, in being their own instruments, practice their research". This is particularly relevant in conflict-prone environments. Lee-Treweek (2000:127-128) posits that feelings are data in themselves, as "our emotional responses are formed in relation to particular settings and have much to contribute to our understanding of participants' emotions in the field". Indeed, our own emotions are often a reflection of the lived experience of the informants, and may function as 'markers' in research (Peterson, 2000). But all the same, emotions may relate to the alienation experienced after some time in a different cultural setting. Such emotions are part of the research experience and provide greater insight into the research process.

At the same time, emotional dynamics may compromise the research project and ethics. Wood (2006) for example reflects on unintended consequences of sharing experiences with local 'friends' or of passing on information confidentially to a responsible person that may 'make a difference'. The difficulty of identifying the true backgrounds of *friends* is illustrated in a story of Nordstrom (1995) who finds out how one of her 'fun and life-affirming' friends who always 'listened with a sympathetic ear' and 'hated the conflict tearing at his country' turned out to be part of the security forces and had killed young (likely) unarmed 'terrorists' in a cold-blooded way. Nilan (2002: 383-384) warns to not consider the most emotionally intense moments (certainly when linked to an ambient risk event) as 'pre-eminent moments of data collection' as these data are often of limited use. Data gathered in the aftermath are generally much more evocative and allow researchers 'to stay on top of the data'.

In extreme cases, emotions may also harm the researcher himself and can even provoke trauma (Wood, 2006). Thomson (2009) points to the importance of acknowledging personal emotions, and raises the importance of self-protection. Davidson (2004) points to three mechanisms that may help researchers to cope with personal emotions: researchers can keep a detailed personal research journal to formulate reflections (standard practice in anthropology, but not in many other disciplines); research institutions should facilitate the creating of joint peer group support that should takes off before the actual fieldwork phase; and decent supervision which acknowledges 'the complex emotionality' of research should be available. Jamieson (2000) equally emphasises the importance of inserting **safeguards and precautions** into the research methodology. Linkogle (2000) agrees with Jamieson on the importance of research institutions to provide their researchers with backup and support. These matters are especially relevant for researchers involved in short-term contract work given that the (lack of) ability of the researcher to deal with the dangers involved may have an impact on further funding and future employment (Jamieson, 2000).

Indeed, even when taking all possible precautions, **psychological trauma** may arise, most often manifesting itself after returning from the field. To our knowledge, no research has been done on the prevalence of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) among researchers working in conflict-prone environments. Among international relief and development personnel, symptoms of PTSD disorder frequently occur (cfr. 30% of interviewed staff in study by Eriksson et al., 2001). The literature points to the importance of personnel programmes and specific training to better prepare people going to the field. A similar argument could be made for researchers heading off to conflict-prone environments.

Deconstructing the overall risk aspect into different categories may help the researcher to make realistic assessments of potential dangers. It addition, it may help to develop particular strategies to minimize well-specified risk factors. Sluka (1995: 277) points out that to some degree, "dangers […] can be mediated through foresight, planning and skilful maneuver". He also points to the importance of investing in 'impression management' to counteract people's natural suspicions to the outsider researcher (Sluka, 1990). Such management can take a deconstruction of risks and emotions faced by the researcher as a useful starting point. Meyer (2007) has developed a framework of decision-making strategies to deal with the management of risks and the assessment of emotionally perturbing experiences ex-post. Nonetheless, regardless of all precautions, field research always entails a certain degree of risk, certainly in conflict-prone environments. As Wood comments on her field research during the civil war in El Salvador: "I had excellent luck; I was never caught in the wrong place at the wrong time" (Wood, 2006:377).

4. WHO AM I? SELF-REPRESENTATION OF THE RESEARCHER IN THE LOCAL CONTEXT

Up until now, we have focussed on the point of view of the researcher, spelling out the responsibilities and challenges in dealing with informants, research collaborators, and with one's own security and emotional well-being. However, another important aspect, shaped beyond the control of the researcher, is how he or she is perceived by the local research environment. As Brown (2009) states, "researchers often forget that while we conduct fieldwork, we are ourselves the object of other people's research. A variety of actors are constantly gathering different types of information on us" (Brown, 2009: 213). The opinions based upon these perceptions have a strong impact upon the research process.

And these opinions of the 'other' are based to a considerable extent on whether or not one is able to 'blend into the masses'. Mothibe (1996: 15) rose that "as an African in the midst of an African majority, I was just one in a crowd and part of the people. This helped to successfully establish cordial and trusting relationships with my informants". Fuh (2009:1) reflects on the advantages of doing research on his own age group in his 'hometown', but reflects on the complexity of "shifting positionalities between being an observer, observing and observed at the same time". At the same time, the **ability to 'blend into the masses'** may become a hazard – certainly in conflict-prone environments. Zulaika (1995) experienced this right from the start, doing fieldwork on the ETA movement in his own community. He explains how this made him liable to accusations of contamination by 'providing an aesthetic alibi to terrorists'. Sangarasivam's identity of Tamil women (although raised in the US) exposed her to suspicion and strong intimidation by the Sri Lanka military police. But her prolonged presence in Tamil Tiger territory also arose suspicions among her fellow colleagues (with Sinhalese identity), which even resulted in a 'joking' accusation of having become a 'terrorist-assassin' (Sangarasivam, 2001).

In most cases, the ability to 'blend in' is severely constraint due to the physical appearance of the researcher (f.e. race, cultural background, …). Some researchers have done a great deal of effort to transform their 'outsider' status into that of a partial 'insider'. Adenaike for example did a great deal of effort to make her appearance match with local expectations. This went from wearing the right footwear to "communicate properly, in words, in attitudes, and in actions" (Adenaike, 1996:8). She in fact internalised the practical, attitudal and vocal skills she needed to undertake her research. McCurdy (1996) went even further by convincing a local influential woman to involve her into the 'unyago' initiation ritual, while promising to keep the secrets involved private. Only in this way could she gain access to what is hidden in the domain of secrecy and learn more about women's lives. Also Strother (1996) did an effort to fit in but acknowledges that she kept on feeling like an actor in a play, even though she did learn 'how to ask the right questions'.

Indeed, most often the desire to transform from outsider to insider - even if partial - is a vain wish. In most cases, researchers do not manage and are even not fully aware of the **constructed image of the local population** with regards to the researcher's presence, the purpose of the research project, and the (supposed) hidden agendas that are ascribed to the researcher's identity. During his research in Botswana, Landau (1996) was for example sometimes mistaken for a (white!) tax collector, district officer, or for a missionary. Fujii (2010), working in the Rwandan post-genocide context, was mistaken for a legal agent who would take prisoners to Arusha, or for a government agent who was collecting information for the impending gacaca (community-based courts to trial 'genocide' suspects). Wood (2006) was mistaken for a religious representative, wrongly deducted from the fact that she was staying with a nun. Thomson (2009) outlines how her research on the lives of ordinary people in post-genocide Rwanda pushed her into the role of a 'therapist' which was personally difficult but gave her an insight into intimate aspects of people's lives. Lee-Treweek & Linkogle (2006) point to the risks involved when researchers are pushed into the role of social workers or counselors whereas they lack training in managing distress and trauma.

In fact, the codification and interpretation of the researcher's identity and behaviour made by the local environment may severely jeopardise the research project. Strother (1996) gives an amusing outline of how seemingly small incidents or actions from her part were being reinterpreted as her seeking *wanga* (related to sorcery). She realised that "the people of Ndjindji were observing me as sharply as I was observing them and that I was presenting a damning array of physical evidence" (Strother, 1196: 67). She was suspected of grave-robbing and of making springs dry up. These images of her identity obviously had an immense impact on her interactions with the local communities. Sluka devotes a lot of attention to the danger of researchers (anthropologists in particular) being considered as spies and elaborates on strategies to prevent such suspicions from arising. He (1995: 283) considers it crucial for researchers "to counter these [false] public definitions of themselves", to avoid misunderstandings and wrong interpretations (that may arise anyway). Fujii (2010) agrees that researchers have to seriously assess and allay local people's fears and suspicions related to the researcher's identity.

Besides the implicit interpretation of the researchers' identity, researchers are often confronted with **explicit questions by informants**. Such questions may relate to whether or not one is married and has children, to religious affiliation, to sexual preference, ... An honest answer may lead to stigmatisation and may be counterproductive to the researcher's position. Lying is another option but may be very discomforting and compromises relationships of trust with respondents (Brown, 2009). Alternatively, one may try to avoid questions and situations that invade certain parts of the researcher's personnel sphere. Wilkinson (2008:57) for example

clarifies how "my fear of being identified as gay as a large part of my sense of needing to maintain an outsider position, both for safety and in order to keep a sense of self". Although hiding certain parts of one's identity is certainly legitimate, pulling this to the extreme is not advisable and stands in sharp contrast to the penetration of the researcher in the private sphere of the research respondent. Best is to think in advance about what information to disclose and where to conceal.

All together, the process of codification and interpretation of the researcher's identity is a complex and hybrid process. First of all, the researcher himself is a 'plurality of selves' (Mollinga, 2008) combining aspects of gender, race, nationality, sexual preference, marital status, age, cultural background, and so on. Second, different population groups – and different individuals within those groups - may develop a diversity of associations linked to the researcher's presence. Finally, the people's image of a researcher's identity and agenda may shift throughout the empirical research process.

In fact, even the **researcher himself may become confused** about his or her own role, position, and identity. Nilan (2002:368) acknowledges how "the researcher as human subject is […] in flux, dealing constantly with shifting realities and contradictions". Wood (2006) points out how her research made her question up to which extent such research is worthy of being pursued over humanitarian work. Brown vividly describes the phenomenon of "white or Western graduate students or academics who fly in, poke around and fly out, writing a Ph.D. thesis or publishing and perhaps even making a career on other people's life-and-death problems" (Brown, 2009:216). He further devotes specific attention to the artificial boundary between the 'on-duty' researcher and the 'off-duty' human being. It is clear that off-duty behaviour in the intimate field research setting – often with little separation between public and private - has an influence on the reputation of the researcher. But at the same time, engaging in informal social interactions is also part of being a human, and can contribute positively to the expansion of the research network. The fusion of on-duty and off-duty roles, of insider – outsider positions, and of one's identity as a person / researcher may at times be extremely challenging.

5. STAYING 'NEUTRAL' VERSUS TAKING POSITION

Researchers do not only have to consider the way in which they are perceived by the informants. They also have to **critically assess their own position** in the complex and hybrid societal dynamics they study. First of all, our disciplinary and theoretical background, together with previous empirical research experiences, often pre-imposes a particular categorisation to order the diverse chaotic realities. But also the interaction on the ground between researcher and research environment influences and shapes the research process. Lecocq (2002: 280) for example points out how "the personal state of mind not only has an impact on one's view on matters studied, it is decisive on whether or not one does see anything in the first place, or even on whether or not one wants to see anything at all". This is particularly relevant in conflict-prone environments where researchers are often sucked into societal dynamics. The mere observation of this fact does however not silence the discussion on what role researchers should adopt as the underlying principle or ideal when undertaking field research: should one allow and even aim for subjective emotional engagement, or is one obliged to strive for objectivity, neutrality and detachment?

Value-free and neutral empirical research is a delusion. Already in 1966, Barnes (in a comment on Henry, 1966: 554) describes how the researcher "sometimes finds himself in the middle of an active political arena, that none of his informants accepts his plea of scientific neutrality, and that

each tries to enlist and monopolize his support". Sluka observes that indeed, "when conducting research based on participant observation in communities involved in political conflicts, it is generally the case that […] **no neutrals are allowed**" (Sluka, 1995:287). It is important for researchers to acknowledge how their position in the political arena affects their methodology and findings. Sangarasivam proposes to acknowledge the role of a researcher as an informant, allowed and even obliged to uncover how implicit research agendas and own experiences have shaped the research project. Her claim is that by "understanding the researcher as an informant, I am conscious of my subject position, my motivation, my agendas. I can reveal my bias and vulnerability as a human subject" (Sangarasivam, 2001: 98).

Sanford & Angel-Ajani (2006: 14) plead for an **activist scholarship** given that "all research is inherently political – even, and perhaps especially, scholarship presented under the guise of 'objectivity', which is really no more than a veiled defence of the status quo". Pieke (1995) describes how the course of events during his research on the People's Movement in 1989 gradually transformed him from an observer into a participant. He is clear on how his position influenced his research findings, given that these focusing (only) on perspectives of the victims from the Movement's suppression in Beijing on June 4, 1989. Reyntjens (2009) defends the role of 'researcher-actor' as a 'not necessarily anti-scientific' position. He points to the artificial dichotomy between the research object and the researcher himself, which in reality is an overly simplified representation of a much more complex and intermingled reality. Reyntjens critically analyses his own role as actor-researcher in the context of his life-long experience in the Great Lakes Region of Africa. His experience shows how openly adopting the role of 'researcher-actor' comes with a price: taking up a political or theoretical stance exposes one to reproaches of partiality. Interestingly these reproaches may come from conflicting sides in the conflict, illustrated by the accusations of 'having switched sides' launched at Reyntjens at several occasions.

Others have taken up a similar position. Scheper-Hughes (1995) calls herself a 'militant anthropologist' which was the result of her 'subjects' pushing her into taking up the role of companheira engaged in political work. She frames 'neutrality' in the case of her research as collaboration with existing power relations, 'allowing the destruction to continue'. Skidmore (2006) argues in the same way how she saw no ethical alternative but to be an engaged anthropologists in the Burmese context of repression and fear in which she did her fieldwork. Davis (2006: 232-233) agrees that "turning up the volume of under-represented voices is not enough"; instead, researchers should be 'pracademicians' who "link research practices to critical inquiry and ultimately to action that will dislodge power".

Lerum (2001) attempts to compromise the contradictory spirit between neutrality and validity checks on the one hand, and subjective emotional engagement on the other. Pushing the debate beyond her own research on sex work in the US, she pleads for engaging in emotional and subjective experiences, while **keeping in mind the need for verification** on interpersonal, organisational, and structural levels. She concludes: "It is thus the combination of *emotional engagement with one's informants* (whereby informants can demonstrate their own interpersonal power and truth) and basic *empirical verification* that produces critical knowledge, which is both self-reflexive and able to critique the power relations between people, institutions and culture." (Lerum, 2001:481) Strother – with a degree of realism – concludes in the same sense that field experience and personal feelings do inflect research findings, although from an ethical perspective the researcher should strive to present findings in the most balanced way possible (Strother, 1996). Warren (2006) sees a window of opportunity in combining the pieces of a

puzzle offered by different researchers – each of them from their own perspective - into a collectively generated wider truth.

6. REMAINING FAITHFUL TO ETHICAL PRINCIPLES DURING DATA ANALYSIS?

In the final part of this paper, we reflect upon the final ethical challenge involved in field research: how to report on, validate and vulgarise the findings? Lee-Treweek & Linkoble 2000:20) refer to **professional dangers** that emerge in this phase of the research, defined as "risks associated with the consequences of challenging or deviating from existing occupation dynamics and collegial preoccupations". Meyer (2009) associates these dangers with the phase in which the researcher returns from the field and enters the writing process. Indeed, when starting data analysis and writing up the research findings, the researcher faces new set of ethical dilemmas. How will professional peers assess the reported findings? And who else may read, interpret and potentially use the data? Indeed, "once published, research findings assume a life of their own with the researcher often having little control over their use or interpretation" (Lee-Treweek & Linkogle, 2000:23).

When reporting on research findings, most academics assume **professional peers** to be their primary public. To fulfil the 'scientific' criteria of decent research, researchers are generally very meticulous in the analysis of their findings, but remain silent on the stories that are hidden behind these findings. The fact that fieldwork is not always fun and that personal dilemmas do affect the research process is often concealed in the final work to support one's credibility as a researcher. This results in a "dichotomy between the open and hidden discourse about experiences in the field" (Lecocq, 2002:273). Lerum agrees in the same line that researchers "put a satisfyingly neat presentation of apparently empirically valid 'facts' about local phenomena out into the public arena, no matter how poorly this may reflect the context of data collection". She concludes that "any attempt to do otherwise implies the troubled power relations that underlie production of academic knowledge and usually results in rejection" (Nilan, 2002:382).

Professional peers are however not the only group that may lay their hands on the final product. Research publications in the hands of **authoritarian governments** may be used to intimidate or punish the researcher, research assistants, and informants. Gabriel (2000:169) rightfully mentions how "we live in a surveillance age in which new technologies and increasingly sophisticated information systems are used to control and regulate marginal groups", and how "research can feed such systems of control depending on how it is taken up and by whom". This is certainly not only the case in the context of Western nations, but also daily reality in countries as China and Iran, Rwanda and Zimbabwe, among others.

But information can sometimes quite simply be deducted from the academic writings without need for any sophisticated technology. Fujii (2008) focussed extensively on the protection of her informants, using pseudonyms and obscuring biographical details to keep locations and identities hidden from the Rwandan administration. But she soon realised that "I could never obscure identities to the point of ensuring that local residents could not recognize some of the people in the book. Doing so would violate the integrity of the data themselves" (Fujii, 2008:20). At her return trip to the field, she realised that her informants will be able to read what she wrote on them at some point (her book was about to be published). Fujii was entangled by her feelings of what their reaction would be. Based on her negative experience with local people's response on her research findings, Ellis (1995) formulated some ethical considerations to be taken into account during the data gathering process and before using data in publications. She pleads in favour of 'reading the texts through the subjects' eyes and paying attention to emotional

responses; while also showing more of herself in the research findings - particularly her interaction and dialogue with residents. Lerum puts her writings up to what she calls 'the gossip test': "when I am writing and talking about my 'subjects', would I say these things to their faces?" (Lerum, 2001:475).

Engaging in **actual presentation of findings at the local level** is the most effective incentive for researchers to keep in mind their ethical responsibilities during the validation process. At the same time, such information sharing involves an element of reciprocity between researcher and informants, 'giving something back' in return for the time and efforts of research participants. This objective may however be extremely challenging in the context of socially divided conflict-prone environments. Researchers have to make sure that their presentation of research findings does not expose local actors to additional risks by perturbing local social relations.

Next to professional peers and involved actors (whether the research population, local interest groups, or the government), researchers also expose their results to the wider public. By doing so, they may feel a need to correct or nuance the public image of certain actors (see e.g. Swedenburg (1995) in his research on the Palestinian revolt). The felt need to correct the public image may on the other hand push the researcher into misrepresenation of his / her own findings when resulting in self-censorship on certain aspects and when using tendentious vocabulary. Presenting research result in an honest way is of crucial importance. Researchers have to take account of the fact that they **contribute to the construction, redefinition and constellation of history**. Researchers should be aware of the ethical implications of their representation and potential misrepresentation of the researched. As Robben (1995: 97) points out: "Our informants have a stake in making us adopt their truths. They perceive us as the harbingers of history. We will retell their stories and through our investiture as scientists provide these with the halo of objectivity that our academic stature entails. What a weight on our shoulders; the weight to be the arbitrators of an absolute truth in which we have lost faith ourselves".

Indeed, when reporting on empirical findings, the researcher is pushed into a position where he or she is shaping an image of realities. The fact that this may contribute to **dynamics of change** – for better but also for worse (see Civico, 2006) – is probably the most important legacy and ambiguous responsibility of empirical research in conflict-prone environments.

CONCLUSION

In her 'story behind the findings', Wilkinson (2008:47) writes: "I want to start with a confession: my research is the product of circumstance, of serendipity and coincidence, of contingency, of interpretations and being interpreted". Such 'confessions' are rarely addressed in the academic scientific literature. Even worse, these aspects are often concealed by academicians under the positivist veil of having produced 'sound science'. Nonetheless, the 'stories behind the findings' deserve proper attention, not only to fathom the inevitable bias in researchers' position in the field and to assess the quality of the research findings, but also to show that the façade of 'scientific validity and neutrality' often hides a pragmatic approach that has shaped the empirical research process. Rather than presenting research findings as the outcome of perfectly planned research set-ups, researchers have the responsibility to give a reflexive account of the context in which they operate. Acknowledging this does not degrade the quality and scientific value of empirical data; instead, it places the results of field research into the right contextual perspective.

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