

Fieldwork Stories: Negotiating Positionality, Power and Purpose

Lynsey Bourke, Sian Butcher, Nixon Chisonga, Jumani Clarke, Frances Davies and Jessica Thorn

“Die wit vrou met die wit kar kom ingery en sy ry weer weg sonder dat ons enigiets weet.”

“The white woman with the white car comes in and out [of the settlement], and we don’t know anything that is going on.”¹

Introduction

Fieldwork in the social sciences is, by its nature, a messy and complicated process. Human relationships established between researcher and participants must be forged and maintained across social boundaries. Notions of difference, perceived through our bodies as they interact with other bodies, can often complicate these experiences in the ‘field’. Because of this, it is important that we remain aware of the effects our own positionalities can have on our research, as demonstrated in the experiences described in this article. Coming to terms with our own privileged identities, be it class, race, gender, nationality or educational background, in peripheral contexts, has demanded a degree of introspection from each of us. Many of us have often questioned our own legitimacy in the field and find ourselves wondering what right we have to enter communities and write about lived realities that we ourselves often do not experience.

In seminar groups, hallways and coffee rooms of UCT², we often interrogate our positionality as young researchers in the field. This ‘identity crisis’ is partly because we are conscious that, in the context of the field, the researcher is continuously challenged with the implications of what her/his body represents – difference and privilege. For some, this discussion may be dismissed as middle-class, guilt-ridden, self-involved drivel. However, the topics addressed in this collective piece continue to be unresolved in terms

of how we, as up-and-coming researchers, rationalise the “body politics” of our own work. Here, we reflect on and respond to this real and permeating challenge which continues to emerge in our experiences and lives as global citizens and academics. The notes which we kept during our ‘fieldwork’, as a method to track and reflect on these issues in our research experiences, were key sources for the article.

This is not a discussion that will necessarily bring new insights into the various themes we explore, but it does provide a critical forum in which we can collectively highlight some of the internal tensions we grapple with in the field as we interact with different and not so different communities. It might also intimate ways of tackling how we may transcend these challenges by moving towards a communicable purpose for those involved in the research process.

This article threads together stories of language, nationality, gender, class and race, exploring how they feed into our individual and collective research experiences. These reflections also make use of Elaine Salo and Sophie Oldfield’s core course and its analytical ‘toolbox’ – a course in which all of us were participants between 2007-8. Moving from the narrated experiences of obvious outsiders to those included in some ways, and not in others, to an experience of doing research ‘at home’, the piece weaves together various experiences of difference. Perhaps these experiences of difference are linked to something more than just overt identity markers – that of simply being a researcher in the first place.

Descriptions of experiences

Who are you?” questions about identity in the research process

Siân Butcher is a Zimbabwean/South African national who recently completed her MA in Human Geography. Her work compared women’s lived experiences of home ownership in Lusaka, Zambia and Cape Town, South Africa. This involved travelling to Lusaka with a Zambian colleague to meet with residents in a particular neighbourhood. However, a young, tall, white woman with blonde hair stands out in predominantly black Zambia and makes an impression. Siân describes a couple of encounters that stand out for her:

“walking back from the bus across a large dusty field, a young man called to us: ‘Hey whites, are you here to re-colonise Zambia?’ I am taken aback, caught off-guard, my tongue thick in my mouth and unable to reply. I turn it over and over in my head all the way back to my room.”

A few weeks later, at a new shopping centre with its indomitable South African franchises – Spar, Ster Kinekor, Pep, Subway – we ran into a friend of my colleague's. He asked us what we were up to, and smiled when she told him about my research project. "So, who are you experimenting on next? Who is your guinea-pig?" It is a joke and it is also not a joke. He adds me, it seems, to the list of foreign development workers and researchers who have flown in and out of Zambia, taking photos and stories with them, leaving little behind.

The politics of this body I inhabit are thrown open everyday here: a body that stands for so much more than just me. Race, gender, class, nationality are constant points of negotiation, justification, positioning. Positionality they call it: the unique identity coordinates of your particular constellation of markers. Marked – that is an apt phrase. Skin marked visibly by privilege, minds marked less obviously by memories of prejudice and exploitation. There is no escaping the GPS-coordinates of positionality and people's responses to it. "Take me on my own terms" you ask. Impossible.

The way in which many communities have experienced research is often associated with white-skinned foreigners and their short-term visits. For Siân, this created conflicting emotions in terms of her research: what was she doing in this context, as one of those short-term outsiders "experimenting" on Zambians?

While in the above, "difference" is read visibly and starkly (by race and gender most obviously), researchers interrogating their own contexts can experience difference more subtly, through language, ethnicity and class dynamics. In the case of Jumani Clarke, a Masters student in Development Studies, he found himself often defending his "Zambian-ness" during the course of his fieldwork:

Mrs Nyambe says to me "Are you Zambian? You are not South African?"

"No, I am from Zambia. I grew up in Zambia. My mother is Zambian."

"Oh. Okay. Where is she from?" was Mrs Nyambe's next question.

"Well, she is from Malawi really, because that is where her parents' villages are. But she has spent her whole life in Zambia."

"So she is Tumbuka³ then?" Mrs Nyambe asked.

"Yes she is," I replied.

"Do you speak Tumbuka?"

"No I don't. But I can speak Chinyanja⁴," I replied.

Then she asked me "*muli bwanji*⁵?"

"*nili bwino*⁶," I replied.

Hitherto I had gotten little conversation out of Mrs Nyambe. However, after I had convinced Mrs Nyambe of my Zambian traits, she was quite forthcoming about her business of buying clothes and bags in Johannesburg for resale in Lusaka.

By appearances and speech, Jumani does not come across as a fellow national to most Zambians. His father is white and speaks like an Englishman. This has rubbed off on both his complexion and speech, which mark him as foreign and different. To Mrs Nyambe, a participant in his study of cross-border traders between Zambia and South Africa, Jumani inhabited an identity that was separate and disconnected. Once he had demonstrated his '*Zambian-ness*' however, by speaking Chinyanja, he was recognized as a fellow citizen. He was granted friendly and open camaraderie as well as information about her business of buying clothes and bags in Johannesburg for resale in Lusaka.

While Jumani was able to "code switch", effectively proving his "Zambian-ness" to his respondents, it is not always that simple. Jessica Thorn recently completed her Honours in Geography at the University of Cape Town. Her own research centered around everyday experiences of contesting eviction to the urban periphery. While Jumani was able to use his nationality as an entry to discussions, Jessica found that her own perceived "difference" within South Africa acted as a barrier to her research rather than an aid:

"My mode of transport, my skin and my language are barriers that assumed a space between *us* and *them*. I found certain aspects of my external social construction mattered to varying degrees in different fields⁷. What emerged was a potent consciousness of my race – embodying the oppressor who evicted the parents of this generation to these outskirts of the City fifty years ago. Moreover, my skin seemed to represent some kind of social standing – a City official or a legal representative. "Why else would I be there?" My skin demands and incites respect, resentment, anger, dismissal, distrust. I find myself necessitating justification."

Do people from very different backgrounds have a right to research in contexts foreign to their own? In contrast, Nixon Chisonga did his fieldwork in the place he calls home, the neighbourhood where he attended primary and secondary school. However, through the workings of class dynamics, he found his own 'insider' status questioned by research participants. What then, does it mean to research one's own 'community'? Nixon explains:

"One of my respondents was a hardware trader who did not want to reveal his name, and in following with my research ethics and ensuring confidentiality, it was up to the respondents to authorize the use of their names or not. He was very uncomfortable on the initial contact, for obvious reasons. For over a week, I would go to Matero Market to observe as he went about his trade. Like in all cases, I did the observations at different times; very early in the morning, mid-morning, at noon, and in the afternoon to mark any variations. After a period of one to two weeks of observation and discussions, I would ask to interview the marketeers. If they accepted, we would then agree on the time and day. After my relentless pursuit and desire to build trust, he gave in. However, he wanted to know where I came from. He was very surprised that I would sit at a good distance from him making notes for three to four hours interspersed by reading newspapers. I told him I had chosen to do research at Matero market because I had lived in Matero for a long time. He asked for my national registration card, the official ID document in Zambia. On this occasion, I did not bring it with me. Then, he asked if I had a passport, and luckily I had carried the passport. After checking, he went on to ask why I was at a university in South Africa. The question implied a perceived 'difference', since attending university outside Zambia is mainly associated with being rich, an embodiment of power. But I was simply grateful he accepted to be interviewed."

These descriptions illustrate how, whether situated in your 'home' country, or in a place one was not born in, our position as researchers automatically calls into question our authentic and personal knowledge of place.

Questions about purpose and research

Identity and difference not only affect access in the research process, but also inform questions around legitimacy, voice and purpose. In the following section, some of the young researchers reflect on how they grappled with these questions of responsibility and positionality.

As part of her work with a local NGO and as fieldwork for her research at the University of Cape Town, Lynsey Bourke, a young female American researcher worked daily at Youngsfield Safety Site, a camp set up for black foreign nationals displaced in the xenophobic violence which erupted across various South African townships in mid May of 2008. In this context of crisis and conflict, where long hours were spent with research participants and

intimate friendships forged, differences in identity, resources and mobility became powerfully salient. Reflecting on this in the poem below, Lynsey says:

You become jaded.

Safety Site space: babies, deadly diarrhoea, complaints consume the inadequacy of, food and facilities. Violent attacks, police arrests, port 'a' loo sexual encounters – all become commonplace, happenstance.

No longer surprised; numbingly desensitized, was I. One cold, cool morning...

Safety Site: a young Rwandan man arrives; blood stained shirt, gaping wound.

Midnight molestation: Wynberg Main. Raw, real, raw: red representation of *the* conflict.

Token tears twisted: turning behind my eyes. I refused release. Persistently, passively, stunned, was I.

Identity embodied as researcher,

this status allows me free travel in and out of *their* spaces.

Freely, I move, weave and move: code switching, within the contexts of Cape Town metropolis.

Le Rwandais,

accosted au Wynberg simply cannot.

From an attempt to secure stolen seconds of *liberté, fraternité et égalité*,

he paid the price.

He, so cool and calm in the recount of his attack:

irrespective of incessant, intermittent acts of violence acted out against *his* body.

In light of the pain experienced by those displaced, it felt selfish to allow myself to grieve.

I saw so much suffering,

yet I would leave the Safety Site to a warm home.

The privilege afforded by my North American background, and spatial location in Rondebosch allowed me not to be targeted in the xenophobic violence of May 22, 2008.

Normalized notions of refugee life/cast in the camps,
 conflicted instinctual response:
through my own worried expression, his face clenched tighter.

The ways in which people respond to traumatic events is varied through individualized experiences. Sometimes emotional responses to another's tragedy can only make the seriousness of situations more painful for respondents. As in this sort of research, researchers remain largely on the outside of the communities they work with, yet become part of the daily community life in which complex relationships are created and formed.

These privileged, mobile researchers also risk creating false expectations amongst participants who may believe that perhaps through the research, their own situations will improve. For Frances, working through these expectations and class differences, and the guilt associated with that, was difficult. A young, white South African woman, she worked in 8st Laan, a relatively new small informal settlement on the 'Cape Flats'. All of the participants she worked with were young women who had moved out of family homes that were too crowded and restricted. The small space they carved out in 8st Laan provided them with the space to establish a home for themselves and their young families. She explains:

"You are here for a reason, you are going to get me out of this shit, I know you are going to help me.' I would leave in the bitter of the cold winters evening, leaving women beaten, blue puck marks all over her face. Her husband having walked away to socialise in the community as if nothing had happened. Children were hungry. Bare feet wondered around in icy rotten water lining the streets. I had to walk away, over and over again. I had to go home. I went home time after time. I could only handle so much, enough of today, this week, this research, this abuse. And of being a woman [...] a privileged woman. I had another life in lit-up suburbia, with a hot shower and a flat with security guards: this was my world."

I finished my research, I thanked my participants. I explained what happened next and that I would come back to see them. I wrote up my thesis and got my Honours degree. I went back a number of times, finding it more and more harrowing every time. The guilt overwhelmed me, driving around Cape Town with me. Everywhere I went there were more people who needed help and I couldn't change their situations in life.

I didn't change their lives. I didn't change anything for them. The research changed my own life, but that didn't matter. The participants live exactly the same way they did before.

The idea that research is more beneficial to the researcher than the researched is a challenging and troubling notion. Who are we researching and writing for? Despite the good intentions of research methodology and scrutinizing how research may impinge on or contribute to participants, time and time again we find that in order to contribute, we require a trade off. *You allow me to interview you and I will assist by giving you a lift to the clinic, or helping you fund-raise for a community event [...] and so on.*

For example, in the case of Zille-raine Heights where Jessica was working, the research facilitated legal assistance for a legal trial and provided legal evidence of the relevant circumstances of the community. Despite these indirect contributions, we ask how the research in itself directly assisted the community? And moreover, how do we openly and clearly communicate the direct purpose of such work? The opening comment of the piece: "Die wit vrou met die wit kar kom ingery en sy ry weer weg sonder dat ons enigets weet" illustrates that the impact of research is not always clear or relevant to the majority of the community.

Analysis

The reflective narratives above have shared some individual experiences linked to positionality, power and purpose in the research process. Frances and Nixon, situated on very different sides of the 'insider/outsider' binary, dig deeper in the next section to get at what being an 'outsider' and 'insider' may mean for knowledge production, and its politics and purpose.

In reflecting on her and other 'outsider' experiences, Frances says:

"The socio-political history of South Africa drew strict racial divides into the geography of our city, divides which have not been bridged in many places post-1994. The presence of privileged 'outsiders' in peripheral contexts is noticed, questioned, threatened by the local members of the community or, on the other hand, is seen as the solution to a problem.

The point is that our presence as researchers 'in the field' will always have an effect on the situation in which we find ourselves. We are outsiders, and can never be insiders. The situation will change as soon as we walk into that space; that space that will be forever unknown to us. What is important to realise then is that we become part of that space for that

fleeting moment of time. For those privileged moments of sharing, we are part of that space and influence that space. And this is what must be recognized."

We as researchers cannot separate ourselves from the space. Who we are, how we are on that particular day and all that, has moulded us into that person that now sits 'within' the ethnographic space will influence the outcome of whatever material we produce. Whatever difference we make, whatever story we write, we as researchers need to acknowledge our influence on the insider.

From the other side of the 'insider-outsider' spectrum, Nixon comments:

"My research was guided by the desire to get at situated knowledge in an African context, in a place I call home. It focussed on gendered spaces of home, citizenship and the city. In Haraway's writing, "feminist objectivity is about situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn to see [...]" (Haraway, 1988 quoted in Bhavnani, 1994). By adopting this view point, there was a responsibility of accepting that I could not separate who I am from the subject of the study. This meant acknowledging that who I am, what I think, who I believe I am, what I write and where I come from, affect the conclusion of my research study. This is what Haraway called feminist objectivity. As an 'insider' on some levels, I thought being Zambian and from the same local area would make the research process easier. But I also knew that shared nationality and language should not be taken for granted. By situating myself as a Zambian who had lived in Matero, I hoped to dispel any particular assumptions that would be constructed about my identity. However, I could not completely bridge the gap created by my educational status and perceived higher socio-economic level. A university education in the compounds⁹ shores up the binary of 'us' and 'them' – 'if they have university degrees, what can we say'. I was an outsider in a place I call home. I also realised that I had the privilege of interpreting my informants' struggles and voices in a manner of my choosing. That meant that I held power to shape those voices based on the questions that I asked and the responses I got. This became complicated because the reasons why these participants chose to speak, and spoke, were important in the study.

Overall, this whole process placed me at the centre and periphery of the research process. I was half insider as a Zambian male, in the same age

bracket as the youngest participant, and with a life experience of Matero. However, I was half outsider as well because any level of university education is held in high esteem and represents a higher status. The fact that I was also from a foreign university outside the country meant my socioeconomic status was interpreted as even higher."

In our spaces of research across various academic fields and identities, we are constantly negotiating our right to be in those spaces. Whether or not our negotiations and explanations are satisfactory to ourselves or members of the 'community', it is important to acknowledge these tensions, for the research, the researcher and the 'researched'. However, this acknowledgement can, and has often led to an impasse, or an abandonment of fieldwork altogether – a result which Nagar (2002) and others question. In moving beyond this impasse, Nagar and Geiger (2000) suggest that we ask the following critical questions:

"First, how can feminists use fieldwork to produce knowledge across multiple divides (of power, geopolitical and institutional locations and axes of difference) in ways that do not reflect or reinforce the interests, agendas and priorities of the more privileged groups and places? Second, how can the production of such knowledge be tied more explicitly to the material politics of social change in favor of the less privileged communities and places?" (Nagar & Geiger, 2000: 2 – cited in Nagar, 2002: 183).

It is not enough simply to abandon empirical work: we need to accountably work at these issues of power and purpose in our written products.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the tensions between insider/outsider, centre and periphery, positionality and representation, process and purpose are part and parcel of what it means to grapple with being a researcher. This is not to argue that other identity markers (of race, class, gender, nationality, etc.) do not shape these experiences and relationships in the 'field', but to add the marker of 'researcher' to the set of positionalities that powerfully shape knowledge. Whether we are 'foreigners' or 'at home', our very task as researchers moves us both to the center (in terms of the power to represent and write) and the periphery (in terms of belonging) of a community. In acknowledging these tensions which arise across identity and the body politics, we may reconsider the ways in which we offer an exchange in which the research purpose is

understood and meaningful for all involved in the process and ask what can assist in bridging these gaps of partnership in the research process. As Nagar (2002) reminds us: “[I]t is critical that such knowledge be produced and shared in theoretical languages that are simultaneously accessible and relevant to multiple audiences *here and there*” (Nagar, 2002: 184), within the academy and the community, the centre and periphery, the North and the South.

References

- Bhavnani, K. 1994. “Tracing the Contours: Feminist Research and Feminist Objectivity” in Afshar, H. and Maynard, M. (eds.) *The Dynamics of ‘Race’ and Gender: Some Feminist Interventions*, London: Taylor and Francis Ltd.
- Nagar, R. 2002. “Footloose researchers, traveling theories and the politics of transnational feminist praxis”, *Gender, Place and Culture* 9(2):179–86.

Endnotes

1. A comment by a young adult male made to a community activist, referring to a UCT student doing fieldwork in an informal settlement on the Cape Flats addressing life experiences surrounding contesting eviction to the urban periphery.
2. University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa.
3. This is one of Zambia’s identified ethnic groups with its associated language, Tumbuka. People who identify themselves as Tumbuka are from or are descendents of people from the eastern parts of the country near Malawi.
4. Chinyanja is a language widely spoken across Zambia, across ethnic groups and 70 other language groups. It is similar in grammar to Chichewa.
5. Chinyanja greeting: “How are you?”
6. Chinyanja reply: “I am fine.”
7. Age and gender, which so often I am aware of in other forums such as corporate environments, did not surface. We may ask why certain markers of identity vary in different fields.
8. The local word often used for township neighbourhoods in the Zambian context.