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The epistemological requirements and challenges of doing field research 'at home'

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There is a tension between a researcher's passion for their subject and the scholarly detachment one needs to study the topic in an academically valid way. This tension is intensified for researchers and research assistants living in their own research area. Local roots provide a certain credibility and facilitate the establishment of trusting connections with participants, but the same roots can bring challenges, where biases in the research process may need to be overcome by working as part of a larger team.

This post was produced as part of the 'Bukavu Series', a series of blogs highlighting the violence that persists in the process of academic knowledge production.

A researcher is, first and foremost, a human being. As such, she is a product of her society. She is defined by a particular worldview, a specific collection of values and beliefs, and a certain frame of knowledge. This researcher produces and constructs field data. Her identity colours all parts of the research process – from the very fact of her interest in the subject under examination to her strategies for accessing the field, to the way she reads her data. At the same time, the researcher must approach information with a certain detachment, since there is never any truly final word in academic research. This

can be a source of contention, especially since what is accepted today might not be tomorrow, and society finds itself in a constant state of evolution and change. There is thus a permanent tension between one's passion for a particular subject of research, and the scholarly detachment one needs in order to study the topic in an academically valid way.

This tension is all the more intense for researchers and research assistants living in their own research area. To begin with, local roots offer a researcher certain advantages. He or she has much easier access to the field in comparison to someone who is an outsider and must first pass through a third-party intermediary to gain entry onto the local scene. Similarly, a mastery of the local language offers the researcher easier entry because she has the ability to interact directly with her interlocutors. Local roots therefore give a researcher a certain credibility and facilitate the establishment of trusting connections with research participants.

On the other hand, having intense local connections also presents the researcher with a series of challenges. First of all, a researcher's preconceptions about her terrain can bias the way she approaches her research. What may seem like 'common sense' to the researcher may in fact be a socially constructed interpretation of reality. The construction of a dataset requires a certain detachment between the object and subject of study. A researcher must be capable of this. She must have the mental and emotional capacity to avoid letting her feelings dictate her interpretations of the local situation to the point where she becomes an impediment to herself.

Also, being part of a community can lead to conflicted loyalties. For example, researchers may feel obliged to obscure the reality in communities in which armed groups are active. Talking about this reality – even in academic language – may be seen as a sort of betrayal among certain members of the community. Working on subjects that involve the researcher personally is even more complicated. For instance, it is very difficult to engage research assistants in the study of cultural initiation practices in their own communities, particularly if they themselves underwent these practices in their youth. Their local roots offer them rich insider insights; but it's almost impossible for them to assume an academic detachment from processes that are so central to their own experiences.

It is here that the question of a commitment to academic rigour comes into play, allowing the researcher to move past her initial ideas and open up to interpretations other than the readings that occur to her 'at first glance', on the basis of the data collected in the field. She must be open-minded enough not to fall back on existing biases, and her opinions must not be limited to a single point of view. The researcher is an analyst of society and

must go beyond her initial observations in order to reach a better understanding of her subject.

Working in a team with researchers of different profiles and backgrounds can yield real treasures. When working in teams that are multidisciplinary, multi-gendered, multinational, multi-ethnic, etc., our diverse profiles can complement one another, helping us to collectively overcome the issues that each individual profile finds challenging. Collaborative work can help researchers confront alternate views and gain maturity by looking at things differently.

Thus, by taking a complimentary approach, we can overcome the challenges that each researcher must face individually.

However, in collective work, it's crucial to be able to overcome the power imbalances (sometimes implicit, other times explicit) that exist between researchers from different backgrounds. There are many divisions that can come into play: North-South, male-female, junior-senior, professor-assistant... Such cleavages may call into question the positive potential of a collective research project. It's therefore crucial, within such collaborative projects, that we pay particular attention to the importance of appreciating the full profile of each researcher. It's only by recognising and making use of every talent in a group that the whole can become more than the sum of its parts.

This post first appeared on the [Governance in Conflict blog](#) hosted by Ghent University, with funding from the LSE [Centre for Public Authority and International Development](#).

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