

ME AGAIN: FIELDWORK, PRACTICE AND RETURNING

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INTRODUCTION

It is election season in Assam, with less than two weeks to go before it is time to vote. A crowd is slowly gathering at a market in a village in Kokrajhar district, where an election meeting by the ruling political party is due to begin. I, along with my former colleagues who are now helping out as research assistants, have been waiting for an hour for the meeting to begin. We are talking to attendees before the meeting starts, and I am furiously scribbling in my notebook, as a good researcher should. An old man comes up to where I am standing, and asks why I am writing. “Are you from the party,” he asks me, “Is that why you are writing down what we say?” I hurry to clear this up. “No, of course not, I’m not from the party, I’m a student,” I say emphatically. He does not look convinced. He wanders over to where a few of his friends are standing, and pointing at me, asks them, “Why are all these people with notebooks suddenly here? I think she’s going to tell the party what we’ve been saying.” I am now desperate to rectify this misunderstanding. In the course of my fieldwork thus far I have been mistaken for a journalist and an election observer, but this is the first (although not last) time I’ve been accused of being a political spy. I turn to my colleagues for help, and one of them goes over to the group, and tells them reassuringly, “She’s not from the party. She’s from an NGO.”

This incident covers many of the issues I will try to address in this paper, all of which stem primarily from my own changing positionality in a field which is both familiar and strange, as my role changed from that of a development worker to student. I situate myself within debates on positionality as it affects the process of research, looking specifically at how a change in structural affiliation affects engagement with the same field. Drawing on fieldwork in north-eastern India, the first section looks at the dynamics of this changing affiliation and its implications on research participants as well as on former colleagues and research assistants, who were also figures in the research process. The second section considers the ethical implications for knowledge production and engagement with research that arise from this shift. I argue here that returning to the field involves specific ethical considerations, such as changing expectations and power relations, as the researcher negotiates new and old identities in the course of doing fieldwork.

I first went to Kokrajhar and Chirang districts of Assam in 2013, as the employee of an NGO that was undertaking a relief and rehabilitation project after a series of major riots between two groups, Bodos and Muslims. I stayed there for a year, working with local partner NGOs, as well as our small team of five persons, which I coordinated. I continued to return there on and off even when I stopped working on the project full-time. I finally returned to Kokrajhar again in March 2016, to conduct four weeks of ethnographic fieldwork on the upcoming elections for my PhD. Broadly, I was studying the links between state policy, governance and ethnic violence. It was the first time I had returned to the region without a project report to write for funders or a

budget to monitor, and also the first time I was there without the structure of the organisation I had worked for defining my role. While I still arrived as the representative of an institution – the university – in practice I felt much more untethered, having only ever known the region through the NGO project.

Issues of positionality and subjectivity are well covered in fieldwork-intensive disciplines, such as Geography and Anthropology. There has been an increasing self-awareness among geographers about how the politics of research is affected by the institutional and geographical positionality of academics, particularly in instances of researchers based in the North studying the South (Madge, 1993; Potter, 1993; Sidaway, 1992, 1993), and the knowledge production that results from these uneven power relations (Jazeel, 2014; Jazeel & McFarlane, 2010). Further reflections have delved into the complexities within these positionalities (and the intersections between them), affected not merely by the North–South divide, but also aspects of class (Gillen, 2012; Griffiths, 2017), gender (Bondi & Domosh, 1992; England, 1994; Gillen, 2015; Kobayashi, 1994; Mandel, 2003; Rose, 1997; Staeheli & Martin, 2000), sexuality (Cupples, 2002; Kaspar & Landolt, 2016), race (Berg, 2012; Faria & Mollett, 2016; Kobayashi, 1994; Peake & Kobayashi, 2002; Pulido, 2002; Schein, 2002), and personality and emotional connection to the field (Laurier & Parr, 2000; Moser, 2008; Widdowfield, 2000), among others.

Locating myself within these debates about positionality and its effect on research, I look here at issues of shifting positionality that are to do with choosing to return to a “known” field in a different role. For many researchers, particularly now as funding at universities becomes more scarce, doing fieldwork within short time constraints means needing as many things as possible to be in place beforehand, both in terms of logistics, as well as ideas. Projects are often built on existing knowledge of a field, through previous work (either research-related or otherwise), or through existing familiarity with a place that may be seen as “home,” which creates its own dilemmas of changing relationships and categories of understanding, and being both an insider and outsider (Ite, 1997; Mandiyanike, 2009; Narayan, 1993; Sultana, 2007; Zhao, 2017). Many researchers return to places they have previously experienced in other ways, to people who have known them in other roles, while being conscious of the fact that they will choose to represent themselves differently.

At the outset, it is important to stress here that I do not imply that my role as a development worker was somehow less problematic or without its own complex power dynamics. Indeed, an exhaustive literature (too vast to be done any justice here) questions precisely this assumption of viewing NGOs uncritically. They have been seen as being, among other things, co-opted and mainstreamed (Banks et al., 2015; Choudry & Kapoor, 2013; Edwards & Hulme, 1996), and overly romanticised and thus hard to critique (Bebbington & Thiele 1993; Fassin, 2011; Kamat, 2004). Nonetheless, NGOs continue to have a global profile, and proliferate in fields like post-conflict reconstruction and humanitarian relief (Lewis & Opoku-Mensah, 2006). Post-conflict Kokrajhar was also a place often weary of the many international and national NGOs that descended on it to undertake humanitarian relief work following the violence in 2012. The inadequate response of government agencies to the displacement crisis precipitated by the riots nonetheless meant that NGOs became an important source of support for basic services needed in the aftermath of the conflict.

Critiquing NGOs can be difficult given the centrality of morality that is often at the core of their endeavours, and given the “moral and political signifiers” they have become (Lashaw, 2012, p. 503). This can be especially tricky if the researcher is seen as having a history with the organisation in question, or is seen partly as an insider (Lashaw, 2012). In addressing these issues of positionality on “return,” and negotiating the roles of student and development worker, I do not suggest that the former is more (or less) problematic, or that the latter does not come with its own power disparities. Rather, I choose to focus here on the disjuncture between the two as experienced from the vantage point of a returning student, in particular relating it to debates in academia about the “usefulness” of scholarly research, especially as contrasted with seemingly more “tangible” roles like those of NGOs.

GOING BACK

“When is the next project starting?” was a question I got used to hearing as I travelled around Kokrajhar again, especially in villages where we had worked previously. I had arrived ready to transition into my student role, but those who had known me earlier as an “NGO type” did not necessarily see my transformation. While the new role led to many awkward conversations about how I would no longer be “helping,” it also lent, in most situations, a greater legitimacy to my presence there. Nancy Scheper-Hughes, on returning for ethnographic fieldwork in Brazil as a researcher after having worked there as an activist, was challenged by her participants for her new positions of “passivity” and “indifference” (Scheper- Hughes, 1995, p. 410). While trying to describe her new role as an academic, and explaining her activism away as being colonialist, she was pulled back towards a more engaged approach by her participants, who questioned her disinterested stance by asking, “what is anthropology to us, anyway?” (1995, p. 411).

Both as a development worker and a student, I existed in Kokrajhar as a woman, a non-tribal with a Hindu name, and an outsider from Delhi, a place that in itself has a complex and often antagonistic centre–periphery relationship with north- eastern India (Baruah, 2005, 2007). These multiple facets of my positionality were also crucial in shaping my access during fieldwork, and while they deserve a thorough examination in themselves, I focus here on the notion of “return.” During fieldwork, it was my previous, more engaged role in the NGO that I found myself referring back to as a way to justify my present role as a researcher. Just as my colleague established my innocence at the election meeting by invoking my NGO worker identity, my own introductions also often led with “I used to work here....” Did I perhaps think that my having “contributed” in some way in the past now allowed me the opportunity to ask questions that circumvented the ethics of engagement during research? Our project in the area, while being focused on rehabilitation, was also designed such that people from different ethnic groups would be working together. Project meetings in villages also involved conversations about peace and reconciliation, as built into the structure of the project itself. While listening in on these meetings in the past, I had often wondered whether the rhetoric of peace and togetherness, echoed by many in the meetings, was not at least partially for the benefit of our project team. Our agendas were explicit, so did this mean that people were “performing” the rhetoric of peace for our benefit, or for being recipients of relief and rehabilitation material? Rarely did the level of fear and distrust between the two groups become apparent in a formal project setting.

Without the project environment to direct our conversations, during fieldwork I found a degree of cynicism about inter- community relations among people that made me wonder if I had been

intentionally blind to it earlier. Despite the fact that people were disappointed about a lack of future projects, in the research context there were discussions about how little they trusted other ethnic groups, especially in the context of the elections, which I was studying. Equally, it is worth thinking about whether this too could be part performance, but one directed at my new role as a researcher. At another level, it is not possible to see the two identities as completely distinct, rather they formed a continuum. Particularly when discussing issues as emotionally difficult as violence, it was only repeated engagement with certain villages that allowed me to ask sensitive questions now, as a student. Researchers often blur a distinction between identities in the field by affiliating with NGOs while they work, in some instances using their positive interactions with participants to ease access (although this also risks compromising the researcher's identity by being too closely associated with the agendas of the NGO). Such engagement is also dynamic, and over a period of time the researcher may be seen as an independent person with an interest in the lives of participants (Chacko, 2004).

The short fieldwork trip I was doing, of four weeks, meant an intense schedule of campaign meetings, rallies and inter-views. I asked two of my former colleagues to help out in this period as research assistants. In the project, there was a conscious policy of creating ethnically mixed teams, and this team, in Kokrajhar, comprised a pair, one Bodo and one Muslim, both men. Part of the rationale for asking both and not just one of them to help out was precisely because ethnicity often made a difference when asking questions, something I learned through previous experience, and has also been pointed out in other reflections on fieldwork (Anwar & Viqar, 2017). For instance, after a particularly charged discussion about politics at a former relief camp for Muslims, both my Muslim colleague and I agreed that had our Bodo colleague been around, people may have been more reluctant to open up. Being “accompanied,” does, of course, affect the way researchers are perceived, and their positionality (Cupples & Kindon, 2003, p. 212), and the idea of the “lone researcher” has been challenged in literature reflecting on fieldwork (Amit, 2000; Gupta & Ferguson, 1997; Middleton & Cons, 2014). Research assistants have their own lenses and biases, whether with regard to class, ethnicity, and so on, which can play a role in interpretation and translation (Turner, 2010). The additional lens of research assistants’ and translators’ subjectivities also makes them active producers of knowledge in the research process (Anwar & Viqar, 2017; Caretta, 2014; Scott et al., 2006; Temple & Edwards, 2002).

While I went back to Kokrajhar aware of these possible dilemmas, I did not go back prepared for how my own equation with my colleagues would change as I too assumed a different positionality in the field. Zhao (2017) discusses the dilemmas associated with asking friends to become interpreters, and then struggling to balance the roles of friend and researcher. My previous relationship with my colleagues, while friendly and warm, remained very much within the bounds of professionalism, guided by the structure of our project team. While we interacted informally and talked quite candidly, the fact that they reported to me, and that I in turn reported to someone else, shaped our conduct. When I returned as a student, however, while we remained respectful of each other, our interactions became much freer. Similar to our research participants, they too moved away from our “party line” of peace and reconciliation, expressing scepticism, from their own positions, about the future of inter-ethnic relations. That our relationship as colleagues had changed became clearer to me when one of them offered to brew me a batch of rice wine, an offer he had never made in the time we had worked together, perhaps thinking it improper. Needless to say I accepted the rice wine, but was also conscious of the shift in our

equation, which, while now more open and personal, also demanded more from all of us. The fluidity between our identities was also apparent – for instance, when my Bodo colleague constantly referred to the differences between our two “projects,” a term we used to refer to our NGO work, and continued to use to define the research. For him, the two projects differed in approach, in terms of responsibilities, payments of salaries, but were still projects, marked by a sense of continuity, in that I set the agenda and he followed suit.

Both with respect to participants as well as colleagues, I was confronted with their changing (and unchanging) expectations, along with my own. Having been used to being perceived as fairly benign (though not in uncomplicated ways), both my colleagues and I immediately retreated to our NGO roles when my intentions were questioned at the political meeting. I may have anticipated being seen differently from a development worker, but I perhaps underestimated the level of suspicion this suspension of identity would invoke. In my preparation for this short fieldwork trip, I considered the more positive aspects of having worked in Kokrajhar previously (familiarity with the area, ease in making contacts, finding research assistants), but considered the negatives mostly in the sense of not being involved in development work, and being seen as less engaged and productively involved with the local community, regardless of their scepticism about the usefulness of “reconciliation” efforts. As the incident at the election meeting showed me, and has also been observed by Mandiyanike (2009, p. 67), being detached from a previous, work-related identity could be seen as threatening, as well as unproductive.

KNOWLEDGE, ETHICS AND POSITIONALITY

My shifting positionality during fieldwork raised important questions about how knowledge is produced, and how to engage ethically as a researcher. In Geography, debates have arisen on the responsibility of academics to engage more actively with policy and politics (Dorling & Shaw, 2002; Martin, 2002; Massey, 2000, 2002), and the need for ethical and political engagement in research, fieldwork and teaching (Katz, 1994; Valentine, 2005). A strand of scholarship in anthropological fieldwork asserts that being politically engaged while doing fieldwork, taking an explicitly activist approach and choosing to identify with marginalised groups make for richer understanding of ethnographic material (Kunnath, 2013; Scheper-Hughes, 1995; Speed, 2006). Adopting a neutral or disengaged stance may become ethically indefensible, but other fieldwork experiences show that engagement too can be fraught with dilemmas of how far to take that involvement, and whether one is “purchasing narratives” through acts of engagement (Smith & Kleinman, 2010, p. 183).

Returning to Kokrajhar with a different role meant re-negotiating my positions on the local political context as well. For instance, as an NGO, we distanced ourselves from the insurgent groups in the region, which held considerable influence in some areas at least. Militant groups in the area are known to collect informal “taxes,” especially from those carrying out economic activities like sales or construction. In Kokrajhar, we were aware that our rehabilitation project, with its elements of construction and provision of material, opened us up to similar dilemmas, but agreed that, like many other organisations in the area, we would not agree to pay. We were lucky that the situation never arose.

As a researcher studying the link between governance and violence, however, I could not afford to just dismiss the activities of insurgent groups as oppressive or irrational. Researching groups

such as these means treading with extra caution, negotiating the balance between understanding how they represent themselves, as well as distancing oneself from ideas that might be disagreeable (Gallaher, 2009). Similarly, many politicians in the area have unpalatable views on many issues, including inter-ethnic relations or the characteristics of certain communities. Being part of the project meant keeping our distance from all political parties, so as not to be seen as “biased,” or as agents of a particular ideology (though the project was not apolitical in itself). But as the incident at the election meeting showed, drawing this line became harder as an individual researcher. As part of election fieldwork, I also travelled with political parties and candidates occasionally, going from one rally to the next, and struggled with how to retain access to these networks as well as to be seen as distinct from them.

What remained constant through the shifting positionalities between student and development worker, in the context of research participants and research assistants alike, was the unequal power dynamic. As project coordinator, I was certainly in a more privileged position than my colleagues, and all of us were in relative positions of power with regard to those involved as beneficiaries in the relief and rehabilitation project. While returning as a student, I could neither erode these unequal dynamics, nor deny the new set of power and privileges that came from being lodged in a foreign university. Among all the material benefits that this institutional affiliation came with, it also brought the power of representation (Spivak, 1988), in categories and concepts of Western academic tradition (Jazeel, 2014; Jazeel & McFarlane, 2010).

Returning for a longer stint of fieldwork means defining one's ethical engagement as a researcher more clearly. Scheper-Hughes struggled with the nature of her own involvement, deciding ultimately that even as a privileged outsider, imperfect engagement was better than none at all (Scheper-Hughes, 1995). There are, of course, also critiques of this view, such as defining the nature of the most ethical engagement is not always an obvious choice. Or that privileging the researcher's morality and decision on how to engage also casts ethics in terms of the researcher's subjectivity alone.¹ Cindi Katz problematises the notion of engaged academic research further, pointing out that academic projects that yield the most “tangible” benefits to participants are often seen as ambiguous in terms of their scholarly worth (Katz, 1994, p. 72). Moreover, regardless of the possible benefits to participants, ultimately it is the researcher who gains the most from the encounter, raising further questions of just how much the power balance can ultimately be tipped (Katz, 1994). Many of these ethical dilemmas are not only specific to returning, but apply equally to a field encountered for the first time.

In the course of the rehabilitation project, “writing things down” became part of our engagement in the field, through documenting case histories and the post-conflict situation. As a researcher, however, writing things down evoked suspicion about its purpose. During an interview at a resettled village, after three long hours of conversation, my respondent gestured at my notebook and said, “I know these things are being recorded, so I'm not telling you everything. I'm telling you a lot, but not everything.” It struck me that this had been one of the villages where we had worked, had a good rapport with many of the residents, but that of course, like many of those at

¹ See comments and responses to Scheper-Hughes, as well as Roy D'Andrade in the same volume, against the moral model in Anthropology (D'Andrade, 1995; Scheper-Hughes, 1995).

the receiving end of relief and rehabilitation benefits by the numerous organisations that set up base in Kokrajhar after the riots, they were wary of outsiders. Whether we came with notebooks or relief materials, we were alien, and most importantly, we were temporary.

Vincent Crapanzano describes the “foreknowledge of departure” as one of the core elements of fieldwork, which affects both the researcher and participants in different ways (Crapanzano, 2010, p. 61). For the researcher, the sense of time in the field is marked by a beginning and an end, and even when promises to return are made, they may or may not be kept (Crapanzano, 2010). While I “returned” to the same field, I did not return in the same role, nor did I go back with the explicit promise to engage and contribute as I would have at least attempted to do through a more development work-orientated role. In his research with asylum seekers and refugees at a drop-in centre in the UK, Darling speaks of a different kind of transition – the more time he spent in the asylum centre, and became involved in daily tasks and volunteer activities, the more his role as a researcher was forgotten or ignored (Darling, 2014, p. 207). While this was part of the research process, it also created a new set of questions about ethics, consent and the ever blurring lines between participating and observing. The moment of transition allows for reflection on the tensions of changing roles, and the ethical questions associated with both.

CONCLUSION

Many scholars develop long-term relationships with their fields, both places and people, returning again and again to the same field site over the course of years, and sometimes even decades. I examine here the dynamic positionality of “returning,” as understood through the changing expectations of colleagues and participants, as well as the impact on ethics and the production of knowledge. In doing this, I attempt to engage with recent texts in Area that have dealt with a diverse range of issues relating to positionality – the native returning home for fieldwork navigating an insider/outsider bias (Zhao, 2017) and/or being seen as “suspicious” (Mandiyanike, 2009), the heterogeneity in categories of privilege (Griffiths, 2017), negotiating multiple subjectivities with research assistants (Anwar & Viqar, 2017) and looking beyond existing social categories to other aspects of positionality (Moser, 2008). The shift in positionality, in my case, arises from a change in structural affiliation – from development worker to student – which, like other aspects of identity, impact the research process. I argue that just as multiple identities in the process remain fluid, with one never completely displacing the other, so too do the corresponding expectations and ethical concerns. In different forms, both remain marked by an unequal power dynamic that shapes the process of development intervention, as well as research. It would be interesting to consider, in further research, how positionality is affected by multiple returns and by becoming a “regular” in the field.

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