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Research Note:

The Ethics of Fruitful Misunderstanding

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*Therefore I lie with her, and she with me,
And in our faults by lies we flattered be.*
(Shakespeare, Sonnet 138)

Details on rural land conflicts can be difficult to obtain. Delicate information, revealing people’s histories and opinions, victories and defeats, is jealously guarded. Often, one depends on good interviews to access such data. Conventionally, as fieldworkers we attempt to create a certain rapport with informants (Goffmann, 1974/1989). That is, we attempt to establish a relationship of trust and a mutual understanding of the purpose of the interview. I do not argue against such efforts at honesty and integrity in fieldwork. Yet, sometimes, misunderstandings can be mutually fruitful, and deception an integral part of dialogue. This may not necessarily replace honesty and integrity, but play out as a parallel digression within the boundaries of the larger social contract of a conversation.

Land conflicts in rural Niger were rife in the 1990s, but their recording very sporadic. Chiefs and other notables usually deal with most conflicts locally without leaving much written trace. All I could get in terms of written records from the local Sous-Préfecture were small pieces of paper, torn from cheap exercise books, where people had reported

grievances of different sorts. I was given access to a huge cardboard box of such “documents” by the Sous-Préfet, but as the actual content was too fragmentary to make sense of, it was necessary to meet with as many of the protagonists of the conflicts (and others in the know) as possible, and have thorough discussions with them. Hence, a single name on a scrap of paper would develop into a string of interviews.

We worked as a team traversing the Arrondissement de Mirriah in the Département de Zinder. My assistant, Souley, a Buzu—of Tuareg captive descent and hence of low social status—could have found it difficult to interact directly with powerful or high caste people had it not been for his fine sense of protocol, colorful experience from life and law’s gray zones, a winning sense of humor, and my presence. Most villagers considered my driver, Alhadi, a Wodaabe—a renowned and rather flamboyant pastoralist group—outlandish and a little wild. Finally, me, a white, European man, who would have had access to no one had it not been for my assistants. At the same time, I also represented an exotic power, which made people intrigued and interested to talk to us (Lund, 1998). Together, my team and I were curious, colorful, entertaining, and objects of gossip.

Distances in the area are considerable. Roads are sandy tracks, and during the rainy season, many of them yield to crops. And due to the nature of our study design, our respondents often lived far apart. To limit transport, we went to people’s individual homes to make the appointment for a subsequent interview at the local market the following market day. Come market day, we would set up camp under a tree at the outskirts of the market. Alhadi would get tea going and Souley would order roasted meat from the butcher that we had something to offer our informants. We were able to have 7-8 interviews in a day and still have time for some shopping and a siesta.

Interviews, as opposed to surveys, resemble conversation (Olivier de Sardan, 2008, pp. 54-65). As interviewers we try to establish a situation where communication resembles the familiar. Yet, an interview remains an artificial situation, and women we interviewed were chaperoned by husbands, brothers, or sons, or, in rare cases, by mothers, aunts, or sisters. The best we could do was to create a comfortable situation, and openness in the conversation that gave the interviewee the lead in constructing the narrative. By simply giving him or her the opening: “So, how did it all begin?” I hoped to avoid predefined categories or concepts, but rather allow for their construction in the conversation (Bohannan, 1966). For most people I talked to, land conflicts were existential. Dispossession literally means ruin. Worlds go asunder when families’ livelihoods, homes, and histories are lost. Talking about their conflicts with these people was a way of giving dignity to their plight and experience. And maybe, by setting their experience to words for an outsider, they would be better positioned to voice dissatisfaction among themselves or to appropriate authorities. This is not big, but it is not entirely small either.

Because of the complexity and sensitivity of the topics at hand, it was not unusual in an interview that we would reach difficult patches that people felt reluctant to talk about. I would then back off and ask a question, which would take us in a different direction. At the end of the interview, I would thank the person, close the notebook and just make polite conversation about the weather, how crops were doing, and so forth, while we

shared some of the meat and had a final glass of tea. Routinely, the conversation would meander back to the thorny issues, and now, with the notebook tucked away in my bag, the information would be volunteered. I saw that as an unspoken agreement between us that this particular information was given to me in confidence. I could use it as knowledge but not attribute it to any specific person.

However, a few days into our routine we had become familiar faces and as we were packing up to leave one afternoon, a group of 5-7 men and women were waiting for us to talk to them as well. The unscheduled conversations with these people developed differently from the scheduled ones. We would share whatever was left of meat and tea and I would prompt the conversation in the same fashion. Only now, people would hesitate to talk until I had produced my notebook from my bag again. They had not been waiting in line to make polite conversation; they were here to have their issue recorded. My interpretation of these unscheduled interviews is less smug and self-congratulatory than my interpretation of my scheduled interviews.

When I first saw the line of “unscheduled” people waiting for me, I was inclined to tell them that we could not talk to them. But that, I felt, would be bad form. Moreover, by talking to people, I thought I might access additional background information. By refusing, I might even jeopardize future scheduled interviews, and, worst of all, I might look like a fool claiming to be interested in people’s lives only if it fit my schedule and not when serendipitous opportunities arose. There is nothing wrong in trying to not look like a fool, unless you do foolish things to avoid it (Orwell, 1940/2010). I never told people anything but the truth: that this was research, that I was not affiliated with the authorities, that I did not record formal complaints, that I would not bring any grievances further into any system, that I could not give legal advice, and that I asked questions because I was not knowledgeable. Nonetheless, people insisted that I receive them and note all details of their narratives. People’s circumstances, concerns, and prospects differed in no way from that of the first group. We systematically sought out and interviewed all protagonists involved in the unscheduled conflicts just as in the scheduled ones. As we recorded the stories of winners and losers alike, the additional information I gained from this group of unscheduled interviews consolidated, rather than changed, my corpus of data. The number of unscheduled informants never dissipated, and the queue of people was an admonition of the severity of the issue and what was at stake for people in line. This notwithstanding, I wonder whether what we “gave back” was not a form of deception. Even with all my verbal protestations that I was unconnected, and, hence, inconsequential, my mere presence told a different story.

People in rural Niger encounter different types of outsiders. There are traders and travelers who—although foreign to that precise locale—are familiar and not different from ordinary folk. And then there are authorities, police, gendarmes, customs officers, and development workers (Hahonou, 2010). These outsiders make decisions: sometimes of little consequence, but sometimes with effects ranging from benign, over nuisance, to disaster. In our composite positionalities my research team and I belonged to neither group, but I definitely had closer resemblance to the latter. While I was aware of the difference between my interlocutors and myself, I was at the time, no doubt, less mindful

of the inequality between us, yet our relative stakes were far from proportional. I never talked to people about their perceptions of the interviews, but they may well have had a better idea of who I was in their world than I did. My acquired knowledge could filter back to the administration or to aid donors—as it did in a way. Besides, talking to “the white man with the notebook” may also have worked to instill some apprehension in their different adversaries. While the talk itself was private, the act of talking to me was as public as it could get, exhibiting both their desperation and their desire to address it. This public display of connections to a white man, possibly in turn connected to redoubtable powers in intricate ways, seemed worth the wait. As a foreign, potentially powerful, man I provided momentary visibility for their grievances.

The unscheduled interviews could be seen as deliberate mutual misunderstanding and reciprocal instrumentalization. I pretended to conduct an interview just as they pretended to be interviewed, and as a core conversation, these were interviews. But there was more to it. In reality, I acted in the moment trying to respond to the queue of people with a modicum of good behavior, to exploit the unanticipated boon of “free” information, and to attempt to not look like a fool. My counterparts in this mutual deception equally seized a moment to talk to me on the off chance that their grievance might be heard, but also with dead certainty that it would be seen.

The engagement between my respondents and me changed over time. Or, rather, with time I grew to realize the extent of our encounter more fully. While I was recording narratives, I was an (oftentimes oblivious) observer, but more importantly, I also became a participant offering a stage from which to be seen by others. This rearranged and extended the ethics applied to private interviews, where integrity is ensured by confidentiality and diligent representation of people’s accounts, to public spectacles much less under my control. At the heel of the hunt, human engagement cannot be controlled like an experiment in a lab. It follows rules of social convention but is also fraught with, and dependent on, uncertainties and improvisations, which look neater in hindsight than they ever feel at the time.

Was our misunderstanding a breach of the contract of the interview? Did we lie to one another? It is difficult to say. In a conversation we are all constrained by its rules and conventions: we have a conversation about something, in this particular case about land conflicts. Yet, at the same time we are free to transcend the constraints of the conversation and employ it in a broader project of interaction (de Beauvoir, 1948/1994). This freedom can be perverted if we simply take the core conversation hostage for other ends. Or, it can digress into a parallel exchange. A soupçon of subtlety, stealth, and deception on both sides may produce nuance and context to the core conversation, enabling us to learn and obtain something more from one another. In this sense, fruitful misunderstandings in fieldwork may be not entirely dissimilar from those produced in conversations entertained by colleagues in a university department, by siblings, or by lovers.

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