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Citation for published version:
Howard, N 2018, Why (and How!) We Need to talk to the Victims. in G LeBaron (ed.), *Researching Forced Labour in the Global Economy: Methodological Challenges and Advances.* Oxford Univerity Press, Oxford, pp. 113-129. <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/researching-forced-labour-in-the-global-economy-9780197266472?cc=gb&lang=en&>

Publication date:
2018

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

Link to publication

This is the author accepted manuscript of a chapter published in final form as: Howard, N 2018, Why (and How!) We Need to talk to the Victims. in G LeBaron (ed.), Researching Forced Labour in the Global Economy: Methodological Challenges and Advances. Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 113-129 and available via Oxford University Press via: https://global.oup.com/academic/product/researching-forced-labour-in-the-global-economy-9780197266472?cc=gb&lang=en&

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Why (and how) we need to talk to 'the victims'

Neil Howard

Abstract

Too often, research on unfree labour is speculative, inaccurate and downright damaging to the individuals labelled as 'victims'. This chapter will make the case that, in order to overcome these serious failings, we need to conduct in-depth qualitative research with victims themselves. This means giving voice to their analyses and experiences and it means spending time learning from and with them. In making this case, the chapter will draw on the author's research between 2005 and 2012 into 'child trafficking' and youth labour mobility between rural Benin and Nigeria.

Keywords

Participatory research, interviews, child labour, child trafficking, Benin, Nigeria

Bibliographical Note

Neil Howard is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Institute of Development Policy and Management in Antwerp. Previously, he was Marie Curie Fellow at the European University Institute, after having read for his doctorate at the University of Oxford. His research combines political economy and political anthropology to examine the political, economic, and ideological construction of 'human trafficking', 'forced labour', and 'modern slavery'. It has been published widely, including in the *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *Development in Practice*, and *International Migration*. His first book is entitled *Child Trafficking, Youth Labour Mobility and the Politics of Protection* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2016).

Introduction

It is now commonly accepted that we possess generally poor quality data on the triad of 'extreme labour exploitation' that are 'human trafficking', 'forced labour', and 'modern slavery'. The United Nations (UN) has frequently decried the data deficit (e.g. ILO 2012), Western governments have called for more to be done, and academics – including those who feature in this volume – have lamented our lack of information. In recent years, high profile efforts have been made to address these gaps. The UN Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking (UN.GIFT) has developed a widely-cited global estimate of human trafficking prevalence; the International Labour Organisation (ILO) has done similarly with regards to forced labour; and the Walk Free Foundation has launched the Global Slavery Index (GSI) to great fanfare. Yet each of these initiatives has been critiqued for their myriad methodological flaws, with the GSI lambasted for its fundamental lack of rigour (Weitzer 2014) and the UN.GIFT report derided even by those involved in producing it (Howard 2016, Chapter 4). Furthermore, certain of these failings are replicated in academic work. Many 'big picture' scholars – including economists, political economists, and political scientists – rely on (and thus reproduce) un-verified, inaccurate, and sensationalist reports of 'forced labour' and 'slavery' in their otherwise valiant attempts to hold the holders of social or economic power to account (e.g. Kielland and Sanogo 2002, Crane 2013)[1].

This paper contends that a major explanation for why extreme exploitation is so frequently misrepresented lies in the very simple fact that far too few researchers

[1] A classic example here is the so-called 'child trafficking' or 'slavery' which has widely been said to plague the cocoa plantations of Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire – a claim discredited by much anthropological research (e.g. Berlan 2013).

actually talk to the people they wish to understand, analyse, or represent when researching the shadow economy. Such is the contemporary fetishisation of quantitative data and so un-reflexive the acceptance of received institutional (or media) reports that scholars and institutions alike often overlook the most basic of research approaches: talking to those especially concerned by any particular phenomenon. This chapter will make the case that qualitative research with so-called victims of unfree labour can provide a major corrective to these current empirical shortcomings. In giving voice to those that one wishes to understand – by using techniques such as interviewing, participant observation, or focus group discussions – it is possible for the researcher to build a picture of life as a severely exploited or coerced labourer and of the factors leading workers to work in such circumstances. In making this case, the chapter will draw in places on the author's original qualitative research in West Africa with young migrant labourers identified by authorities including UN agencies and NGOS as 'victims of child trafficking'. That research took place in multiple stages and over many years, between 2005 and 2013 as part of the author's professional work in Benin, his Master's and ultimately his PhD. It involved interviews and focus group discussions with over 150 Beninese youth currently or previously involved in labour mobility equated with 'child trafficking', including many on-site and at work in artisanal quarries in Nigeria.

1. Collateral damage

There are at least four reasons why our current informational inadequacies are so significant. These are empirical, political, ethical and epistemological. The first two are reasonably self-evident: from an empirical standpoint, if we wish to understand a

phenomenon with any degree of confidence, we need precise measurements, triangulation of observations, and depth to our perspective. Similarly, from a practical or political standpoint, if we wish to design effective interventions that have the desired outcome, we need sound understandings: the more we know about any given phenomenon, the more control we are likely to have when taking action to affect it.

Sound understandings are also an *ethical* imperative, given that often political or project interventions to 'save' unfree or exploited workers cause what Dottridge has rightly called 'collateral damage' to those workers themselves (2007). Acting on the basis of poor quality data or un-checked assumptions, national and international policy-makers, and even well-intentioned humanitarians, have historically pioneered blunderous interventions that have actually made life worse for the very people they were supposed to be assisting (see Bourdillon et al. 2011 for a series of painful examples). The current author saw this at close quarters in Benin and Nigeria, where the explosion of the child trafficking discourse in the early 2000s led donors, UN agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and some scholars to effectively tar all underage mobility as the equivalent of child trafficking, with draconian policy consequences including the promulgation of an anti-trafficking law that effectively illegalised unaccompanied child migration and rendered any adult 'accomplice' a *de facto* trafficker (Morganti 2011, Howard 2013). Many innocent people were arrested at the borders as a result, many willing young migrants were either obstructed in their migration or forcibly repatriated, and hundreds of thousands of dollars were absorbed into a quixotic civil society effort to get the Beninese to stay 'at home'.

This relates to the fourth, epistemological reason. In contrast to more traditional, positivistic understandings of the social world, the post-structuralist starting point holds that meaning is always and everywhere relational, a consequence of social and discursive practice. On this understanding, concepts do not possess any definitive 'essence'; rather, they are 'fixed' only ever partially and as a consequence of the ongoing exercise of *power*. This is significant because power is never evenly distributed: different actors within the social field have differential meaning-making capabilities. For instance, the poor, black, African adolescents with whom this researcher worked across the Benin-Nigeria border had far less influence over their definition as 'victims of trafficking' within international child protection circles than did the rich, white, non-African aid workers most frequently using that label. This itself is important for a number of reasons. First, a democratic egalitarian epistemology *requires* us to take into account the definitional perspectives of those whose lived realities we wish to 'understand' or label – and indeed to build meaning dialogically with them. Second, failing to do so carries with it the risk of legitimising and sedimenting problematic, disempowering, and at times dangerous discourses about people disenfranchised from the meaning-making process. The consequences of this have been most clearly documented when it comes to young people and their suffering at the hands of the international anti- child labour architecture. That architecture has been critiqued by anthropologists from around the world for its ethnocentric bias, relying as it does on a liberal, capitalist, and particularly Western understanding of human social, cultural, and biological maturation (James and Prout 1997, Wells 2009). It characterises under-18s as inherently vulnerable, lacking in the agency (and thus the rights) that pertain to adulthood, and therefore in need of 'protection' *qua* exclusion from the dangers of the labour market. When operationalised, this vision of childhood

has caused the poor children whose positionality within global capitalism requires them to work for a living major 'collateral damage', in particular by legitimating policy interventions that exclude them from paid work (Bourdillon et al. 2011). Worse still, it also *systemically* disempowers *all* children and communities whose livelihood practices do not conform to the dominant norm of a Western, workless childhood and who will thus eventually face 'intervention' at the hands of those whose task it is to 'save' them (Boyden 1997). The non-participatory epistemological approach to research thus carries with it major ethical dangers.

2 'Talk to Us' – The Importance of Qualitative Research

One simple and potentially powerful way to correct these failings is to talk directly to the individuals who are aggregated into the statistics that shape law, policy and projects, observing their lives and their interactions over time, and reflecting on one's observations with them. This can be challenging. Most researchers face both time and money limitations, and it takes skill and courage to gain access to certain sites of the informal economy. But those challenges can be overcome, even in the context of under-resourced projects like the average PhD. The rest of this chapter will reflect on how and why this can be done and in doing so will draw from the author's previous research into child trafficking and youth labour mobility in West Africa. Below is a brief description of that research in order to situate the reader.

2.1 Overview of the research project informing this chapter

In 2005, I volunteered for a small Beninese NGO engaged in anti-trafficking work in Cotonou. It became clear to me that mainstream anti-trafficking discourse said very different things about youth labour mobility to what was said by the young labour migrants I encountered in my work. Whereas dominant discourse painted young migrants as vulnerable and likely to experience abuse, young people told stories of growth or emancipation, or of voyages that were no more than a 'normal' expression of their economic needs. In order to understand the reasons behind these discrepancies, I adopted a case study approach, identifying a paradigmatic example of a putative trafficking flow: the crossing of boys from the Za-Kpota region of the Beninese South to the artisanal gravel quarries of Abeokuta, Nigeria. Much had been written about this flow and even World Bank economists had been dispatched to run large-scale surveys in order to ascertain relevant causal trends (Ouensavi and Kielland 2000). Yet surprisingly no-one had ever spoken directly to the migrant boys themselves, or visited their places of work. For my PhD research between 2009 and 2012, I therefore selected four source villages using a local research assistant who was sub-contracted from an NGO working in the area and together we snowball sampled former teenage migrant labourers who had returned from the quarries, others considering leaving, parents, and local social authorities. We subsequently complimented this sending zone research with research in the receiving zone, in the quarries that were the destination for these adolescent migrants. Here again, we used snowball sampling to identify important figures from the local socio-economic hierarchy, and talked with over 40 working boys on site and at work, over a total period of around 12 months between 2009 and 2012 Interviewees were accessed through the mediation of a locally active NGO which had good relations with the quarry power hierarchy. This safety for all involved. Naturally, interviews were conducted with consent and at a safe site of the boy's choosing.

Our findings flatly contradicted the dominant discourse, which held that these teenagers had been forced or tricked into their work and mobility. Our data said otherwise, revealing their labour mobility to be situated within complex socio-economic webs that were at times both exploitative and supportive. For example, although the men employing these boys all made more money from their work than the boys did, they also provided the boys with food, lodging, and protection. Moreover, by giving them work they offered them an important, established path to the social manhood they were seeking. In turn, our findings pointed to policy and project interventions that were very different from those of the reigning orthodoxy, which sought to shut borders or stifle movement. What talking to young migrant workers revealed was that simply providing alternative employment options in Benin or labour protection in Nigeria would have been a more welcome approach. Although that story has been told more fully elsewhere (Howard 2016), below I will reflect in on certain methods used to construct it and that other researchers can use to conduct similar research into the shadow economy.

2.2 Interviews

Without doubt, the primary research tool for in-depth qualitative research is the interview. The reasons for this are threefold. First is the aforementioned epistemological standpoint that research must be '[about] the "generation" of knowledge, rather than its capture or extraction' (Veale in Campbell and Trotter 2007: 33). Many qualitative researchers consider it a moral-ethical imperative to gather the personal testimonies of those whose life-worlds they wish to understand. And my research with young migrant labourers suggests that they do too. On more than one

occasion, the uniqueness of the fact that I was asking them how they made sense of their experiences led them to hug, clap and cheer me. In one instance in Abeokuta, a group of normally very sceptical young workers actually even downed tools to break into a Fon song of thanks. This reflects the sheer emotional importance of giving people the opportunity to speak on their own behalf, instead of perpetuating power imbalances by having others speak for them.

Secondly, interviews can often provide more accurate data than other methodologies such as surveys, since they allow one to access the unique, personal perspective of the individuals under analysis. A useful example of this can be provided by contrasting a qualitative approach such as the one advocated in this paper and the survey approach employed by Ouensavi and Kielland in their classic, World Bank study on the same flow of teenage migrant workers that I researched from Benin to Nigeria (2000). Ouensavi and Kielland had sought to understand why young people leave home in such large numbers in this region and to do so they systematically sampled mothers – and only mothers – asking them why their child had left. The logic behind their approach was twofold. First, that statistical sampling yields more accurate data than qualitative research. Second, that 'a mother always knows best' why her child has decided to migrate (p.2). Their findings were standard – poverty being given as the prime reason for a child's departure.

Yet their findings have major limitations. First is a chronic lack of depth. My research also showed poverty to be a key motivation for young migrant workers, with nearly all claiming that earning money was their key goal when they left. The difference, however, is that talking to them allowed me to contextualise this search in myriad social

and cultural processes that gave meaning to it. For instance, some boys left so that they could earn enough money to return to school. Others went to earn money for marriage. Still others to contribute to their family households. None of this complexity was captured by Ouensavi and Kielland, whose conclusions pointed simplistically towards desperation or starvation as the meaning of the word ‘poverty’. A second limitation of their approach relates to the constitution of their sample. They chose mothers because ‘a mother always knows best’. But qualitative research on youth mobility from across West Africa shows that mothers in the region are often the *last* people to know why their children have migrated, with adolescents frequently absconding without asking parental permission (e.g. Hashim and Thorsen 2011). As such, although their statistical approach may have yielded a far greater sample size, the assumptions embedded in the composition of their sample ensured that its findings were entirely unreliable. Had they interviewed young migrant workers themselves, by contrast, their findings would have been very different indeed.

The third major reason for employing interviews as a core research methodology is that, in researching dynamic realities of the kinds involved in much of the shadow economy (such as networks of illegal labour mobility), breadth is as important as depth, and it is the interview which most clearly allows one to develop understandings across a broad swathe of time and space when unlimited resources are not available. Although only long-term ethnographic study can allow for the generation of ‘deep’, ‘thick’ data of the kind advocated most famously by Clifford Geertz (1994), in the absence of such extended time periods, a large number of well-chosen interviews can provide a very rich dataset indeed.

The interview is not without its problems, however, and should not be understood as a panacea. As Heissler highlights (2009: 144), the quality of data gathered through interviews can often be undermined by a participant's failing memory or indeed by the picture of themselves that the present leads them to wish to convey. Respondent 'reactivity' and narrative 'accuracy' are thus genuine issues in interview research, which must be accounted for when triangulating one's research design. In my case, triangulation was achieved through speaking to a large number of differently-positioned people (over 300) in each of our research sites and cross-checking their many claims against each other. For example, in checking the validity of a former child migrant's claim, we were able to cross-check that with his peers, family members, or former employer. Likewise, in assessing the accuracy of a parental evaluation, we could include the perspective of neighbours, local authority figure,s or young migrants themselves. Numbers are important, therefore, even in qualitative methodologies.

In terms of the conduct of interviews themselves, there are many different approaches that one can take, ranging from the closed questioning of traditional surveys to the entirely open-ended meander of a more ethnographic conversation. Each has its merits. In my fieldwork, I endeavoured to employ what Levy and Hollan describe as a 'person-centred approach', which involves more open-ended questions that invite participants to elaborate the interview in ways they see fit, rather than being fully directed (and thus constrained) by the researcher (1998). This is incredibly useful because it allows participants to exercise much more agency in shaping the research encounter, which can in turn provide more (and more contextual) data than that which can be obtained through the closed questioning of surveys (Boyden and Ennew 1997: 8). An example of how useful this can be from my study came when I interviewed a group of men

formally recognised as ‘traffickers’ for their role in the migrant labour network linking Za-Kpota to Abeokuta. Having spent much of our meeting asking them questions about working conditions in the quarries, I eventually asked them what they thought I should be asking – and they promptly told me all I needed about the labour recruitment process.

While it is often useful, therefore, for interviews to be person-centred and to a large extent interviewee-guided, it is often sensible for them to be at least *semi-structured*, with the interviewer working loosely around a number of central themes. This is important when the researcher has a number of core topics to address with each interviewee and at each site. Similarly, it can be useful with influential and often busy interviewees, for whom purely open-ended questioning might become frustrating, since it can appear too directionless when one has limited time available.

2.3 Group interviews or focus groups

A second core qualitative methodology for researching the shadow economy, and especially for achieving the compromise between breadth and depth, is the group interview or focus group discussion, which I utilised on a number of occasions in and around my case study villages in Benin, and across the border in Nigeria. This method of interviewing can be particularly helpful when seeking to obtain village- or community-level data, or when investigating collective perceptions or commonly-held norms structuring important social practices. The following extract from my field notes demonstrates how this technique can work in practice. I was conducting a group interview with a collection of non-schooled adolescents in Tenga village, trying to understand how young people like them perceive the concept of migration and relate to

the idea of 'elsewhere', which is of critical importance when seeking to understand phenomena labelled as 'trafficking'. Having initially struggled to make myself understood with questions such as 'How do you feel about the idea of leaving home for work?', I turned to word association and asked everyone to shout out the first thing that came to mind when I mentioned the names of common migrant destinations.

> **'What do you think of when I say the word "Cotonou"?**
>
> - One boy said that he thinks there are lots of opportunities down there. They have electricity, they have radios. He himself wants to go there and get a job, but since he didn't go to school and learn French he knows it will be hard.
>
> - Another said that when he hears the word "Cotonou", he thinks of a place that everyone dreams of going to. He would like to go there, to discover it and enjoy the amenities, but he would also like Tenga to develop into a Cotonou itself.
>
> - A third boy also said he'd like to work there…
>
> **What about Europe, translated as "*yovotomè*" – "home of the white man"?**
>
> - The boy who spoke good French and had clearly been better schooled than most said, "When we say *yovotomè*, I think there is money there".
>
> - Another said that there is loads of business there, loads of work, and that that is what we need in Benin.
>
> (Interview with Group 11, Tenga Village, 14/5/10)

This excerpt offers a useful indication of how effective collective interviews can be at generating deep data of the kind often missed either in survey research or in research that relies too heavily on second-hand data. But collective interviews also have other advantages. One is accuracy, at least with village-level data, responses can be and are cross-referenced and validated by those present. For example, if one wishes to have a sense of the availability of land for purchase, of the period of greatest rainfall, or of highest out-migration, a collection of local voices will likely provide a more accurate

response. Additionally, interviewing in numbers can provide greater comfort for younger, adolescent, or otherwise socially 'subordinate' participants. Many commentators have noted that, given the social power imbalance between adults and children or between men and women, some participants will be more at ease when surrounded by their peers, which is also very likely to be the case when researching among those fearful given their work status. This was something I often found with young migrants at their place of work – when interviewed in groups boys more easily opened up about their experiences, their challenges, their joys, and their motivations.

None of this should be read, however, as implying that group interviews or focus groups are without their pitfalls. Like any other method, they have their limitations. For one, without careful moderation such encounters can often find themselves dominated by one or two particularly vocal individuals who drown out other participants. For another, the chances of participant reactivity are arguably much higher in such settings than they are in one-on-one encounters – it is not difficult to imagine, for example, a scared worker offering opinions which are more safe than honest when in the presence of those who may report her to her employer, which again points to the importance of quality triangulation.

2.4 Interview Issues

Although individual and collective interviews do therefore have much promise when researching the shadow economy, it should be noted that conducting them effectively on matters of illegality also comes with various challenges. One relates to data recording. Some claim that data recorders are essential in interviews in order to generate

reliable transcripts and texts that can then be verified by secondary sources. Others, by contrast, reject recorders out of hand as likely to alienate or endanger participants. Both arguments have their merits. Nevertheless, although mindful of the greater accuracy offered by voice recordings, I opted against recording interviews in Benin and Nigeria, largely because I wanted to avoid estranging or endangering participants. I understood that those who were or had been previously engaged in illicit activity might be wary of the trappings of officialdom, and I was fearful that the existence of voice-recordings could compromise their security.

Another essential challenge for conducting this kind of interview-based qualitative research is language, and the need to work through an interpreter if one is not fluent in the respondent's native tongue. Levy and Hollan note that 'it is deeply distorting not to work in the respondent's core language' (1998: 338), and there is no doubt that my own inability to grasp all the sociocultural nuances embedded in the Fon words that my interviewees were using in Benin and Nigeria distanced me from the fullness of what they were saying. This will have been compounded by the presence of my research assistant, who literally embodied the structural gap between me and them, as well as between me and what they said (Fontana and Frey 2003: 77). Moreover, as Morrissey observes, 'instead of being passive conveyors of knowledge, [translators/interpreters] actually constitute active participants in the research process and make important judgements about what information is conveyed. As a result, what is commonly thought of as passive translation might actually constitute an active transformation of the messages that are being conveyed' (2010: 148-9). This ultimately means that everything I was told at village level was refracted through the subjectivity of my research assistant, with the consequence that his positionality inflects and effects all of

the data I gathered during this project. Such an obstacle simply cannot be overcome when one wishes to deploy the interview to research the shadow economy, and it must be accounted for in both design and analysis phases.

Yet it should not be assumed that the presence of an interpreter or research assistant is always and everywhere a drawback for qualitative research. Far from it. In most cases, research of the kind I have described would simply not be possible without such support. Similarly, a well-trained assistant can add greatly to the research process, providing nuanced interpretations, grounded insights, and of course access. In my own case, my assistant was both a close friend and a well-established social worker within the Beninese anti-trafficking field. As such, he was well trained in working as an interpreter and in anthropological methods and consequently proved to be an enormous source of personal and professional support throughout our fieldwork. For example, as a result of his positionality, our relationship, and the freedom I offered him during research, he would frequently pick up on noteworthy information shared by interviewees and would take the initiative in exploring propitious research angles. This often led us to obtain information that I otherwise would not have accessed. For example, when examining migrant boys' motivations for their mobility, it was only his situated knowledge that allowed us to tease out the frustrations teenage boys often felt at their subordinate position within the home and the liberation thus constituted by their migration. This is a detail that is also inevitably missed by quantitative research. My research assistant also had myriad useful interpretations, anecdotes, and reflections to share both about our research encounters and the wider field we were examining. Moreover, as a community 'insider', he proved invaluable in facilitating my entry to – and acceptance by – the communities with which I engaged, serving therefore as far

more than a mere linguistic bridge between my interlocutors and me. Indeed, when researching the shadow economy such a human 'bridge' is often essential.

2.5 Participant observation or 'hanging out'

Interviews may well be the cornerstone of much qualitative research, then, but the structured and artificial nature of the interview set-up means that even when it is person-centred and open-ended, it can only take you so far. To go further, the researcher needs what Bernard describes as the 'sine qua non of anthropological fieldwork' (1998: 16): participant observation. According to Atkinson and Hammerseley, all 'social research is a form of participant observation because we cannot study the world without being a part of it'. In this view, 'participant observation is not a particular research technique but a mode of being-in-the-world characteristic of researchers' (1994: 249), or what Mosse would call 'participant deconstruction' (2005: 13). It involves spending time with research participants, joining in with their activities, asking questions whilst taking part, wearing both of the hats of insider and critical observer at one and the same time, and developing as much of a 'feel' for what it is to *be* an insider as one can. In my view, this is critical to in-depth qualitative research and it represents a crucial complement to interviewing. It was fundamental to my work in Benin and Nigeria.

What does it entail? In my case, during the first round of my research and before I chose my case study villages or my cross-border destination site, it involved living for six months immersed among Fon families in Cotonou, working in a shelter for young people identified as 'trafficked' from areas including Za-Kpota, engaging in the daily rituals of community life, working, talking, playing with Beninese children and young

people, and ‘hanging out’ in the Rodgers’ ethnographic sense of the term (2004). This allowed me to familiarise myself with many of the rhythms, norms, and behaviours of the case study communities I wished to understand before even arriving to meet them. That familiarity, in turn, facilitated my speedy acceptance – to my ethnographic delight, ‘He’s already a Beninese’, ‘He’s definitely not a real white man’, and ‘He’s just like us’ were some of the refrains I heard when displaying my *initié* status through cultural performances that a non-*initié* simply would not have been able to offer.

In my case study villages themselves and across the border in Nigeria, the fact that I chose to divide myself between four villages and a destination zone meant that I was unable to live truly ‘inside’ any of these communities as a participant observer in the way that I would have liked to have done, or in the way that a researcher conducting fully ethnographic research would do. This remains a regret, since I know that it affected the depth of the data I was able to gather, and meant that I missed certain nuances or micro-processes that are important to understand when building a ‘thick’ description of any social world. Nevertheless, the fact that I lived for six months in a settlement located at an equal distance from each of my research villages and thus spent many long days and nights in and between each meant that I was still able to observe and participate in a great deal of social life. Certain of my most revealing conversations came whilst shelling peanuts or drinking beer at the local *buvette*, while others happened on random walks through the villages. This depth is simply impossible for the kinds of large-scale ‘in-out’ research beloved of survey-reliant economists, or for those political scientists who rely on second-hand accounts of life inside the shadow economy produced by the likes of the UN. As Box 1 demonstrates below, long-term presence as a participant in a community can open doors to the kinds of critical and

hugely informative social encounters that can truly deepen analysis. In this case, the depth related both to the performativity of those engaged in shadow economy activities when encountering figures of power, and the sheer lack of comprehension on the part of those powerful figures attempting to influence the shadow economy. Neither of these nuances could ever be grasped at surface level and without time and trust.

Indeed, trust is an absolutely critical factor in the practice of participant observation, since without it one is often unable to access informants, research sites, or research moments that are truly revealing. This is especially the case when researching illegal or illicit activity, and when the 'stakes' of letting a researcher in can be very high for participants. One of the major advantages of the long-term fieldwork that is at the heart of participant observation is thus precisely that it gives the researcher the time necessary to build this trust and thus gain that access. In my case, had I not been able to build trust, I would have faced a near impossible battle to get beyond the mere 'surface' of what people chose to share with me and enjoy insights of the kind below. In fact, I was once told by one of my research participants that when he first saw me, all he thought was money. 'You were', he explained, 'no more than a dollar bill', and it was only the fact that I got to know him and his community over time that enabled me to make the cross-over into trusted acquaintance.

Box 1: Participant Observation: Notes from a Donor's Field Visit

It is early morning and I am in Sehere village, having come on the occasion of a US Embassy "project assessment". Could there be a better window into the functioning of the anti-trafficking field and the way that villagers and their allies strategically engage it?

At the start, N told the assembled villagers to "ham up" their participation, to "sell their project" to the donor. S explained that although the kind of project work we were watching did happen when the donor wasn't

present, the extra number of people on show today, including the local women's group, was specifically about "marketing" their participation.

After the dignitaries had met and greeted each other at the Embassy's Range Rover, we all gathered in the school room, were welcomed by the kids, and sat down to the business of discussing projects. N brought out a standard spiel about how this was project a key initiative to help keep kids at home, and to fight against trafficking and migration. He really exaggerated, and it was difficult to listen to given that I know it all to be false.

All the while, the Embassy rep looked so tired and *so* uninterested. Her body-language was totally disengaged and it was clear that she had been doing this all day. The visit itself was in many ways merely representative, and what impression she could have gained about the community, its needs or even the project presented from the time she spent there I just don't know.

It was interesting to note how numbers- and target-focussed the Embassy people were. Her Beninese assistant asked how many kids are at the primary school, noted it down, and then noted down how many girls this included. When we mentioned the participation of the "women's group", he noted that too. After a bit, we got on to what the community was expected to do. It was so painfully patronising when he said "we expect the community to raise 25% of the cost of the project", before asking "what will the community be doing to ensure that the project survives after it has been started?".

Once the meeting had finished, everyone got up to leave and the Embassy woman and I made a beeline straight for each other. It was clear she was interested in what a white man was doing here, and also that she was interested in my opinion. Our interaction was pleasant, but it smacked so loudly of colonialism my ears hurt. She told me how she had been all over the region today seeing projects. Only this one was mildly impressive, she said, and she asked what I thought...

My overall impression of her was of an upper-class donor woman who meant well but didn't really know what was going on. She criticised the sprouting of NGOs, saying everyone and their dog has one now, even if she understands why "our governments" don't want to give money to "their" governments. She then complained about the "stupid villagers", mentioned something about grief and thought it was "barbaric" that parents seem not to grieve their kids here, and finally she complained about a woman being smelly in her car, in a real hush-hush, white-person-to-white-person, look-at-these-natives-who-don't-use-water kind of way. Madness.

2.6 Personal positionality

Two final considerations are important in this discussion, as they are in any qualitative research project – and especially with potentially 'vulnerable' participants such as many of those populating the shadow economy – are the researcher's personal positionality and the ethics of the research process. In her seminal piece on the importance of understanding one's positionality in research, Beverley Mullings defines the term as denoting the 'unique mix of race, class, gender, nationality, sexuality and other identifiers', each of which can shift fluidly with time and place, and each of which can interact and intersect with the various vectors of other people's identities in a way that necessarily impacts on one's research understandings (1999: 337).

In my case as a white, male, adult, graduate student from a Minority World, anglophone society, I inhabited identities during research which were different from the black, francophone, African, frequently unschooled, young people whose labour migration I was studying. This unquestionably impacted on the nature of the bonds I was able to form and thus on the understandings they enabled me to cultivate, though not only in negative fashion. For Mullings, it is not simply that 'insiders' or 'outsiders' get better information, because in different contexts being 'the same' or 'different' can help or hinder the research process in equal measure. While identity is multiple and fluid, what is most important is to seek common ground which can 'engender trust and co-operation' (1999: 340), or in Berreman's famous terms, to learn 'impression management' (1972) and to activate different aspects of one's identity at different points in order to better relate to different others.

In managing my own impressions during research, different aspects of myself (or selves) came to the fore at different times. In my case study villages and in Abeokuta,

for instance, explaining clearly that I was a researcher vehemently opposed to the dominant anti-movement emphasis of anti-trafficking policy and that I advocated for changes in that policy was integral to my gaining the trust and acceptance of interviewees and to being able to transcend the socio-economic baggage of being a white man in an African country. The following example clearly illustrates this, as it involves my emphasising these aspects of myself in order to persuade one of my key informants to help me assemble and interview a group of men involved in the migrant labour network linking Za-Kpota to Abeokuta and thus formally and legally identified as 'traffickers'.

> '**Neil:** Trevor, my friend, who else do you think should I talk to [vis-à-vis "trafficking" and the structure of the migrant labour network]?
>
> **Trevor:** Hmm, it's going to be difficult to talk to anyone really, because people will definitely lie to you. No matter what you say, they'll think you're going to arrest them, or that you're going to report them to NGOs or the police…
>
> **Neil:** Oh come on man, you know that's not me!!!
>
> **Trevor:** Yes, but I really don't think there's anything you can do. Even me, I was only honest with you originally because I've left this activity behind.
>
> **Neil:** But you know I'm not with the police…
>
> **Trevor:** Sure, but the problem is that people here don't respect your word when you give it. It's not like where you're from where you can trust someone. Here people lie, they don't trust each other. Even the President lies. He came here promising to pave our roads and he never did a thing!
>
> **Neil:** I know, but I think I really need to at least talk to *some* of the guys involved in Abeokuta, taking kids across and avoiding the authorities, you know?
>
> **Trevor:** Yes, I do see that...
>
> **Neil:** So how about this then – you know what I'm researching, that I'm against the way you and your boys have been defined as "traffickers" and also that I'm against the attempts to stop people moving. Can you try and round up some of your people, tell them and emphasise this, emphasise that I'm just here to learn what they think and show the world a different picture, and then see what they say?

> **Trevor:** [After a pause] Alright, I can try that, I'll vouch for you and we'll see what we can do. [We then agreed to meet next Wednesday at 10, with about four or five of his friends, for a beer at the *Maison du Peuple*].
>
> (Interview with Trevor, Za-Kpota, 7/4/10)

Crucial here was my activating the part of my identity that coincided with Trevor's: as someone frustrated by dominant policy and keen to challenge it. This fact, no doubt along with my maleness and the repartee this also generated between us, was critical[2].

2.7 Ethical considerations

Finally, it is important to emphasise that qualitative research with potentially vulnerable populations such as those engaged in the shadow economy involves a number of serious ethical considerations. Chief among these is always the obtainment of informed consent. As Boyden and Ennew argue, this 'is especially important in research involving children because they are much less able than adults to exercise, or indeed recognise, their right to refuse to participate' (1997: 41), though as much can be said for any subordinate individuals. Throughout my own fieldwork, I was careful to obtain and continually renegotiate consent and thus took great care to ensure that everybody I worked with was both aware of this right *and* fully informed as to what the research

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[2] In my case, a further particularly interesting aspect of my research positionality was the frequently liminal space I inhabited and which I believe allowed many people to feel comfortable with me in ways that would not have been possible had I been definitively one or another thing. For example, in Benin, being a Francophone enabled me to converse freely with people in a way that an Anglophone could not, but in being British, I was able to avoid the negative colonial and post-colonial associations of French politics in the region. Furthermore, the fact that I had lived and worked in Benin previously and thus already attained a certain level of intimacy with Beninese cultures meant that, in contrast to many researchers, I was an *initié* to a number of the situations I was experiencing. This undoubtedly worked in my favour, just as my being both an academic and a pseudo-member of the anti-trafficking community led many anti-trafficking actors to see me both as 'one of them' and as an informed observer whose opinions were worthy of respect. While not all researchers will necessarily enjoy such liminality in their research in shadow economy activities, all have choice over which aspects of their selves to articulate in order to establish the bonds necessary to achieve mutual understanding.

entailed when exercising it. One useful means for achieving this is to ask people if they can explain what they think you are trying to understand after having introduced your work. Another is to ensure that they are offered the opportunity to reaffirm or withdraw consent at different points throughout the research interaction. Given what is at stake in researching the shadow economy, I typically do this verbally instead of obtaining written consent, since written consent can either alienate participants for whom literacy is low or cause discomfort amongst those unfamiliar (or too familiar) with institutional authority.

Another critical ethical concern in this kind of research is guaranteeing the security and safety of all participants. Doing this necessarily depends on the context and the particular dangers faced by each participant. In my case and in villages or at teenage boys' place of work, I took care to conduct research encounters in as safe and comfortable a setting as possible, which was commonly a shaded location of their choosing, to which we repaired after authority figures had been suitably convinced of what we were doing. Now away from fieldwork sites, I have continued to protect the identity of my respondents and any sensitive data they gave me, by coding and securing my notes and by anonymising anything that could potentially point to the identity of individual participants or places identified. This is essential if you possess material that could be incriminating.

A further ethical issue in this kind of research is reciprocity. In line with critical theorists from Horkheimer to Habermas, sociologists including Bourdieu and Wacquant, and anthropologists from across the board, it is my belief that research should be both 'action-oriented' and beneficial or empowering for participants. In the

words of Seymour-Smith, researchers must try to 'perform some useful or valued service in return for the collaboration require[d]' (in Robben and Sluka 2007: 9). This can take a number of forms. In my case, at its most basic it involved treating all participants as equals entitled to my respect. With the young and with my case study communities, this began by asking for their views on their life-worlds, a practice all too uncommon amongst those who generally create 'knowledge' around the trafficked or vulnerable to trafficking, and one which was consequently received with genuine gratitude. Similarly, in such encounters, I endeavoured to validate my interlocutors by mirroring their behaviour. An example of this would include my drinking from the same cup as interviewees and also pouring a drop of water on the ground in honour of our shared ancestors. Beyond such symbolism, though I never offered payment to anyone involved in my research, I expressed my gratitude materially by buying coffee or lunch, by giving things such as footballs to groups of young people, or by buying and sharing either a round of drinks or a bottle of *sodabi*, which is Benin's famed palm wine. I felt this to be a much more equal gesture and the joy with which it was generally greeted suggests that it was perceived as such as well.

My attempts to ensure reciprocity have also continued long after the end of fieldwork. Research participants often asked me to 'tell the truth' or to 'get this information out there', reflecting at once the need to be heard and the desire to change hegemonic practices, which are maintained precisely because such voices are not frequently heard. I have therefore written newspaper articles, published open-source academic papers, established with the Editor of this volume the openDemocracy.net *Beyond Trafficking and Slavery* website, worked on a documentary film, and engaged in persistent corridor advocacy to see institutional discourses, policies, and practices shift in the direction

that both I and the majority of those who participated in my study believe that they must.

Relatedly, my last crucial ethical concern is with the politics of representation. Hastrup and Elass (1999) show how even when advocating for a group (or for a more 'accurate' representation of that group), one has to be careful to avoid the homogenising tendencies of almost all representation. With a group as broad and, frankly, externally defined as 'trafficked children' (and their communities) this is especially true. In order to avoid misrepresentation, therefore, I took pains to discuss and reassess my interpretations with participants as I was making them and am still in contact with many of my research participants, with whom I continue to discuss and elaborate my position.

Conclusion

Qualitative research is not, and cannot be, a panacea for all that is wrong with research on the shadow economy. Interviews and participant observation data can be difficult to scale up and often fail to convince the powerful, for whom numbers are the stock tools of trade. Yet such research is essential for understanding the nuances of both the lived experience of exploitation and the conditions that lead to it. It is essential for overturning the assumptions of the blundering policy elite and the well-meaning scholars who at times unwittingly exacerbate their blundering. Most importantly of all, such research is necessary for developing the situated and effective interventions likely to avoid collateral damage. A sensible beginning for anyone interested in understanding or addressing 'forced labour', 'trafficking', or 'slavery' would be to do all possible to

talk to and observe workers themselves. What is more, doing so might just change the researcher’s received understandings.

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