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False Starts, Suspicious Interviewees and Nearly Impossible Tasks: Some Reflections on the Difficulty of Conducting Field Research Abroad

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Qualitative Research Graduate Certificate

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Abstract
In this article, I discuss some of the problems I have encountered in conducting field research abroad, specifically in England, South Africa, Russia and China - a broad variety of societies ranging from free to not free societies. I discuss the problems I encountered and how I overcame some of them and was stymied by others. I have had problems gaining access to interviewees; establishing rapport with interviewees from different societies; and have had my motives questioned. Nevertheless, my research has been rewarding and has resulted in a number of serendipitous discoveries.

Keywords
Field Research, Open-Ended Interviewing, Research Abroad, Reflexivity, Serendipity, South Africa, Russia, China and England

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In this article, I discuss some of the problems I have encountered in conducting field research abroad, specifically in England, South Africa, Russia and China – a broad variety of societies ranging from free to not free societies. I discuss the problems I encountered and how I overcame some of them and was stymied by others. I have had problems gaining access to interviewees; establishing rapport with interviewees from different societies; and have had my motives questioned. Nevertheless, my research has been rewarding and has resulted in a number of serendipitous discoveries. *Key Words: Field research, open-ended interviewing, research abroad, reflexivity, serendipity, South Africa, Russia, China and England.*

Introduction

Although I teach within the subfield of public administration, my interests are wide-ranging. I am a professor of political science at the University of Wyoming, but have had articles published in political science, sociology and education journals. I have also been published in several foreign journals. My interest in studying foreign societies began at the early age of 16, when I had the opportunity to live in rural South Africa for one year during the dark days of apartheid with my uncle who was a Protestant missionary. I have conducted a considerable amount of field work abroad and aside from a few courses in research methodology during graduate school, I am largely self-taught, although I owe an intellectual debt to Shulamit Reinharz for her book *On becoming a social scientist: From survey research and participant observation to experiential analysis* and to Hortense Powdermaker (1966) for her book *Stranger and friend: The way of an anthropologist.*

During the past thirteen years, I have conducted field research abroad in societies that were not free, partially free and free, as judged by the Freedom House (Freedom House[1]). My research has taken me to China (not free), Russia (partially free) South Africa (partially free during my first visit and free during my second visit) and England (free). Much of that research has involved conducting open-ended interviews with government and university officials, students, professors, businesspeople, clergy

[1] Freedom House is a non-profit, non-partisan organization American-based organizations with offices around the world. According to its Mission Statement, "It has championed the rights of democratic activists, religious believers, trade unionists, journalists and proponents of free markets." For more information, see their website at http://www.freedomhouse.org/.

members, artists, politicians, political activists, prisoners and street gang members. With the exception of my research in England, my principal interest has been to examine problems faced by emerging democracies. Research projects I have undertaken, include: assessing the prospect of political change in South Africa by interviewing political activists during that country's transition to democracy (Hubbell, 1993); evaluating the University of Stellenbosch's language policy and its primary use of the Afrikaans language (Hubbell, 2002); analyzing the social behavior of street gang members in London (Homer & Hubbell, 1996); and evaluating the state of civil society in Russia by examining how well university democracy functioned at a regional university (Hubbell, 1999b). In addition, I have also written an article on the difficulty of establishing a faculty exchange program with a Chinese university following the American bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999 (Hubbell, 1999a) and attempted to develop a grant in conjunction with a Chinese university that would have aided me in studying how China's experiment with village democracy was proceeding.

Overview

Conducting field research with people from another culture can be a daunting task. Some of the problems I encountered are unique to foreign research projects. Specifically, the problems I faced abroad were: gaining access and establishing rapport with interviewees in not free or partially free societies, or even within free societies; maintaining authenticity; overcoming the suspicions of some interviewees, particularly in countries where spying is pervasive; surmounting some reasons why potential interviewees will either not allow themselves to be interviewed or will respond with extreme caution during an interview; dealing with preconceptions that many foreign interviewees harbor regarding Americans; and overcoming the perceived status differences between the interviewer and interviewees.

If American academics do not address these questions while conducting research abroad, they run the risk of alienating their interviewees or in some cases dooming their research projects. This article provides details regarding the problems I have encountered in my foreign research projects. However, before delving into this issue, I briefly examine the methodology I employed – the open-ended interview. I also discuss some of the "nuts and bolts" of field research, specifically the importance and some of the logistics of obtaining an affiliation with a foreign institution, which is often an essential first step in conducting field research abroad and establishing contacts.

Methodology

Janesick notes "Interviewing is a meeting of two persons to exchange information and ideas through questions and responses, resulting in communication and joint construction of meaning about a particular topic" (1998, p. 30). Unlike forced choice questionnaires, the open-ended interview is an exchange of information and a joint construction of meaning. It is more structured and focused than a mere conversation, but allows for the surfacing of more serendipitous and potentially interesting information than a questionnaire. Such an interview

> … can be summarized in terms of four simple principles: use open-ended not closed questions, elicit stories, avoid "why" questions, and follow up using respondents' ordering/phrasing. . . . this entailed a single, open, initial question that was also an invitation: Please tell me your life story. Beyond that it involves attentive listening and some note taking during the initial narration to follow up on themes in their narrated order, using the respondents' own words and phrases, eliciting further narration through open questioning. The art and skill of the exercise is to assist narrators to say more about their own lives (to assist the emergence of their gestalt) without offering at the same time, interpretations, judgments or otherwise imposing the interviewer's own irrelevancies (thus destroying the interviewee's gestalt). Apparently simple, it required discipline and practice to transform us from the highly visible asker of our questions to the almost invisible, facilitating catalyst of the interviewees' stories. (Holloway & Jefferson, 1997, p. 60)

Particularly with an engaged and trusting interviewee, the interviewer does not know where the interviewee will lead her. Sometimes routinized and regularized procedures result in ignoring significant information. As Powdermaker writes "Little record exists of mistakes and of learning from them, and the role of chance and accident in stumbling upon significant problems, in reformulating old ones, and in devising new techniques, a process known as 'serendipity'" (1966, pp.10-11). Another researcher notes:

> Then as I started to write about our conversations. I realized how his willingness to let me enter his world, indeed his insistence that I do so, created for me the possibility of serendipities, "moments of sudden awakening" to the significance of activities I had not planned to look at, questions I had not thought to ask. (Knapp, 1997, p. 339)

Although open-ended interviews may be less systematic and less "objective" than more mainstream closed-ended, forced choice instruments, I find the latter technique not to be very revealing. It is reflective of a social science that attempts to separate the interviewer from the interviewee. Instead, I try to establish a link with an interviewee that requires openness and engagement – a philosophy that differs markedly from a positivist social science. It speaks to the difference between gaining mere data and understanding a person's life experiences (Mills, 2002, pp.107-123).

Given this style of openness, sometimes interviewees can make quite startling admissions. Indeed, according to Knapp, the open-ended interview provides for a "shared agenda setting" between interviewer and interviewee. She notes that it "is not just a useful technique for establishing rapport with people, or even just one of my obligations as an ethical qualitative researcher and educator. It is simply the best way for me to learn, to achieve my goals as well as those of the people with whom I interact…" (1997, p. 340).

Furthermore, while interviewing in South Africa in 1991, one interviewee recounted to me how his mother, an alleged government informant, had been killed by an angry mob. In another case, I was appalled by the blatant racism of a leading member of

South Africa's Conservative Party. Also in South Africa during the same time, I had the opportunity to interview a recently returned spy for the African National Congress, who recounted to me his relatively recent training in East Germany as an undercover operative. Finally, a 15-year-old gang member claimed, in an interview with me that, in what at times took on the characteristics of a confession, he had recently killed a member of a rival gang. Was this merely a case of bravado? I don't know, but his admission did reveal much about the culture of the gang.

During each of these interviews I could not have maintained the demeanor of the impartial social scientist, even if I had so desired. The life stories that my interviewees told me were sometimes shocking, almost always revealing and occasionally uplifting.

Although in advance of the interview, I typically prepare a series of questions that I believe to be relevant, I make sure not to be too wedded to my "script." Instead, I provide the interviewee with the latitude in our discussion to move in directions that I may not have anticipated, maintaining my own reflexivity and remaining aware of my interviewee's moods and nuances.

> Self-reflexivity is present also during interviewing, even though little has been written about this unspoken, inner or self-dialogue. The researcher must remain cognizant of and handle several activities simultaneously. The conversation with the interviewee, a dialogue has to be followed closely; responses and attempts to change the line and direction of discussion considered, anticipated and guided, both in order to talk about topics not yet covered or to return to others in order to flesh them out; and the overall situation monitored, logistically and emotionally. (Arendell, 1997, p. 342)

Thus, the open-ended interview is less subject to the interviewer's control and is intended to elicit insights into the interviewee's life world. It is an exercise in phenomenology – an attempt to gain access to the interviewee's Weltanschauung. Liebermann notes, "The craft of a qualitative sociologist consists not of an objective methodology but of hermeneutic practices that permit the researcher to understand the indigenous world close to the way it appears to the people themselves" (1999, p. 53).

Some Nuts and Bolts of Field Research

Receiving an Invitation from a Foreign University

Getting a foreign institution to serve as a host provides an American academic the necessary bona fides with both government officials and potential interviewees. Indeed in some countries, most particularly Russia and China, invitations from a host institution are a necessary prerequisite for obtaining a long-term visa.

In the countries where I have conducted research, most universities are eager to develop an affiliation with an American university. Developing an affiliation with a foreign university is often a relatively easy matter. However, sustaining that affiliation is much more difficult, especially if the arrangement is not underpinned by a grant. Foreign university officials have a number of incentives for developing affiliations with American institutions and some of them are quite self-interested. First, an affiliation with an

American institution often enhances the foreign institution's prestige. (I was frequently photographed during my visits to a Chinese university and my picture is emblazoned in that university's yearbook.) The American higher educational system enjoys a very high status abroad, particularly in Asia. As evidence of that status, at least in China, Chinese graduate students outnumber all other nationalities at American graduate schools.

Second, an affiliation agreement may improve a foreign institution's access to American grant money from private and public sources. Funding sources like the University Affiliations Program funded by the U.S. State Department typically provide travel money within their grants for foreign nationals to visit the United States - a special perquisite particularly for academics from resource-starved countries like Russia and China. Unfortunately, given the hierarchical academic structure of both of these countries, the people who are most likely to participate in any grant are not necessarily those who are best qualified, but instead those who are most politically connected.

Third, foreign university officials and professors have frequently approached me to help their children obtain admission to and financial assistance for American universities. In such instances, I freely provided advice to aspiring students and their parents, but I have obviously disappointed some of them in my disinclination and inability to offer access to my own and other American institutions.

Finally, sometimes universities located in countries that have been largely isolated from the outside world make willing exchange partners. For example, I established a friendship agreement with the University of Stellenbosch, a largely Afrikaans-speaking university in South Africa, just as the United Nations was beginning to lift trade sanctions against that country. Chinese and Russian universities have also been eager to establish ties with American universities in recent years as these countries have opened up more to the West.

How does one establish an affiliation with a foreign university? I have found it advantageous to make use of contacts/friendship agreements already established between my university and a foreign counterpart. Especially after a grant expires that has previously provided travel opportunities for members of both institutions, sometimes friendship agreements between two institutions can become moribund. American and foreign institutions often encourage members of their academic staff to visit and conduct research at an affiliated institution in another country as a way of demonstrating to previous and future funding agencies that their relationship is a continuing one. Being part of an established relationship with a foreign university has definite advantages, especially because one can often rely upon the foreign university's foreign affairs office for assistance in procuring housing and interpreters and making travel arrangements.

In another instance in the early 1990s, I received an invitation from a university department by simply sending out my research project proposal to a number of institutions. (This kind of "shotgun approach" has been made more efficient by the development of the Internet.) The department in question provided me minimal support, but they did introduce me to a number of valuable contacts.

Establishing Personal Contacts

Indeed, while I was affiliated with the aforementioned institution, I made contact with a university official at another institution who was referred to me by a professor at my institution. This official, in turn, referred me to a professor at a third institution, which two years later signed a friendship agreement with my department. Often significant contacts are developed circuitously. In another instance, I received an invitation from a foreign scholar who had been conducting research at my institution. From my perspective, this is perhaps the ideal way to establish an affiliation. In this sort of arrangement, the researcher at least is familiar with one of the people she will be interacting with while abroad.

Personal contacts are the most reliable way for obtaining access to interviewees. Especially in foreign countries, "cold calls" to potential interviewees seldom result in an interview. A researcher has a significant advantage, if he is able to tell a potential interviewee that a person known by the potential interviewee referred her. A researcher's host institution can be especially valuable in launching a researcher's interview process. And then the web of contacts often grows from there. Contacts invariably beget more contacts. If an interview went well, I would typically ask my interviewee, whom would they recommend that I also interview.

Opportunities and Obstacles to Field Research

Why People May Want to Be Interviewed by Foreign Researchers

Perhaps the most difficult step in conducting research abroad is gaining access to interviewees. It is often useful to look at it from the potential interviewee's perspective: Why would a person want to speak with a foreign researcher, particularly an interviewee who is a member of a not free or partially free society? Even in free societies, an interviewee can find the interview process a disembodied experience. In some instances, the researcher develops hypothesis, formulates a data instrument, administers the instrument to sometimes unwilling participants, collects and tabulates the data and then translates that data into an article or some other "output." There is often little thought on the part of the researcher about sharing the results of the data generated with the very people who provided that data. Given such a scenario, why would anyone want to participate in such an enterprise? Thus, in many cases just obtaining access, requires the researcher to be cognizant of the interviewee's needs.

Providing Financial Incentives

Sometimes interviewees from lower socio-economic groups may want a financial incentive before they agree to be interviewed. For example, while conducting research into the social behavior of English gang members, I provided each of my interviewees with twenty English pounds. We met for the interview on "neutral territory" - on the fourth floor of a public housing project in a neighborhood that had been claimed by another gang. They viewed their compensation as based on two factors: 1.) the information and life stories they provided me; and 2.) "hazard pay" for having to venture

through the territories of rival gangs for the purpose of meeting at our agreed upon interview site.

Providing Interviewees with a Voice

Particularly for people who feel disenfranchised by their society, the open-ended interview can provide them with a voice. I sensed this need among many of my interviewees. I try to collaborate with my interviewees, much like Reinharz does.

> Our team coined the term "temporary affiliation research" to describe the researchers' stance in combination with the setting members' experience of pleasure and psychological benefit, which they explicitly expressed. This term was intended to convey the human mutuality that was missing in the behavioristic phrase "participant observation." According to the individuals we visited, the very acts of being sought out, studied and affiliated with reinforced their sense of personal worth. We gave them an opportunity to present themselves positively and a chance to be heard. (1979, p. 316)

Some interviewees, the often-disregarded members of society, simply want to be heard. They also may be more likely to open up with a researcher who is not from their society. Their willingness to be interviewed may reflect an unconscious need for acceptance. For example, the gang members I interviewed, both in the neighborhoods and in the prisons, were clearly anxious to receive some form of affirmation – in this case from a person in authority who did not wield power over them. Weinberg felt a similar need in a study she conducted of single pregnant teenagers in a maternity home (2002, pp. 79-94) as did Ungar and Nichol in their study of the ethics of social workers (2002, pp. 137-151) and Stratton did in her study of closed institutions (2002, pp. 124-136).

Other interviewees undoubtedly have more self-interested reasons for wanting to be heard. Some may be looking for a forum for their political views, particularly members of political parties outside the mainstream. While in South Africa in 1991, I was courted by leaders of both ends of the political spectrum – the extreme right wing Conservative Party and the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) that remains South Africa's most left wing party. Indeed, the leadership of the youth division of the PAC invited me to one of their political rallies.

Why People May Not Want to Be Interviewed by Foreign Researchers

In my view, there are usually more powerful and more numerous reasons why people would prefer not to talk to foreign researchers. Conducting field research abroad can be particularly difficult in countries where civil society is either tenuous or virtually non-existent. Given the taken-for-granted-realities that people hold in these countries, why should they place their trust in researchers, let alone foreign researchers?

Spies Among Us

Like it or not, American academics conducting research abroad, particularly in not free or partially free societies, are often perceived as spies. Suspicions run high, particularly in not free societies (China) and within partially free societies (Russia and South Africa). Given the closed nature of Chinese society, American intelligence agencies and other American government agencies glean academic articles and other available sources for any glimpses they can get into Chinese society. As an example, government officials at the State Department questioned me about the Chinese reaction in a relatively remote province following the May 1999 American bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, while I discussed with them a possible grant opportunity. I left that meeting feeling that I had been somewhat compromised.

During the early 1990s in South Africa, both the African National Congress and the National Party Government spied on each other. Although tensions were somewhat reduced by Nelson Mandela's release from prison in 1990, both sides remained suspicious. In an interview with a member of the Islamic Brotherhood, I was sharply questioned by an interviewee regarding whether I was a government spy. At this time, I was quite disturbed that one of my interviewees questioned my motives. However, this person's suspicions did not seem so out of hand when there was a subsequent attempt to recruit me by another interviewee who was a member of the South African secret police (Hubbell, 1993, pp. 223-231).

The Lack of a Civil Society

In 1997, I was interested in conducting interviews among Russian civil servants. The previous summer I had visited Russia taking advantage of an existing relationship between my university and a Russian university. During my first visit to Russia, I befriended the chair of that university's Politology (Political Science) Department. At the time, I was also chair of my Political Science Department, a factor that in status-conscious Russia apparently attracted him to me. During my two-week stay in Russia, we made some preliminary plans for a faculty exchange between our two departments and I expressed some interest in conducting future research in Russia.

In the following six months I received a university award and was provided the opportunity to conduct more extensive research in Russia. My initial plan was to examine Edmund Burke's contention that successful revolutions require the revolutionaries to hold over a significant portion of the officeholders from the previous regime. It was my plan to conduct open-ended interviews with these officeholders in the hopes of learning how they had coped with the transition from Communism to a more democratic form of government. I hoped to gain access to these officials through the good offices of the chair of the Politology Department. The chair was extraordinarily well connected. During the Soviet era he had been one of the leading members of the Communist Party at this university.

In making my arrangements to conduct research and live in Russia, I made contact through the normal channels with the university's Foreign Affairs Office for the purpose of securing an invitation and obtaining help finding housing. I did not contact the chair, because he and most of his colleagues had limited knowledge of English.

Unbeknownst to me, the Foreign Affairs Office was an arm of the university's rector (president) and the rector and the chair of the Politology Department had a longstanding feud. When the chair learned that the rector had invited me, he was miffed and responded by having only limited contact with me during my three-month stay in Russia. Having reached a dead-end, I like other researchers before me changed my research project and as a result made some serendipitous discoveries (Powdermaker, 1966, pp. 10-11; Knapp, 1997, p. 339). Instead I studied the dynamics of university democracy in Russia, which at this university were quite fractious. In this instance I was fortunate in that I was able to transform a dead-end project into another meaningful research activity. As Liebermann indicates:

> Openness to transformation means openness to the local contingencies that complicate one's agenda and may even force one to reset or abandon one's priorities. The contingencies of field inquiry are not to be viewed only as obstacles to one's inquiries but as opportunities to learn which inquiries really matter. These contingencies should be celebrated for they are where all real discoveries lie. (1999, p. 49)

Thus, I conducted open-ended interviews with the leading political figures at this university, including the rector and his allies and the chair of the Politology Department and his allies. (Given my "fall from grace," as judged by the chair of the Politology Department, it was somewhat difficult to gain access to him and his allies, however I was advantaged in not using one of the many interpreters employed by the Foreign Affairs Office, viewed by the chair as being spies for the rector. Instead I employed my own interpreter.) I concluded that at this university, politics was both nasty and brutish and was probably emblematic of the lack of a civil society in the broader Russian society (Hubbell, 1999b, pp. 424-443).

Some Ethical Questions

Presenting Oneself to Interviewees

Interviewees always carry with them preconceptions about their interviewers. Those preconceptions can affect the degree to which interviewers are able to achieve rapport with interviewees. One's race, gender, ethnicity, skin color, age, socio-economic class and occupation are some of the significant factors that can affect the relationship that forms or does not form during an interview.

> Also interviewees with different characteristics will tend to perceive respondents differently and will react to them in different ways. Thus varying types of social contexts will either facilitate or hamper communication and thus affect the information obtained and recorded by the interviewer. (Williams, 1964, p. 340)

American academics have an additional obstacle they must confront when they are conducting interviews abroad. Given America's cultural domination of the world, many people have strong opinions about Americans. Some abhor American cultural

influences; others are fascinated by it. My concern was that given my status as an American, my interviewees would not be honest with me.

> Status characteristics directly affect communication and similar status tends to reduce bias, especially by reducing inhibitions. Research studies thus indicate that the greater the disparities among status characteristics between the interviewer and the respondent, the greater is the pressure felt by the respondent to bias his responses. (Williams, 1964, p. 340)

Although I felt that I never overcame my status as an American, I tried to connect with my interviewees by demonstrating a sincere interest in what my interviewees told me. I tried to overcome our differences by demonstrating unconditional positive regard (Hubbell, 1993). Demonstrating unconditional positive regard was particularly difficult in one instance when I interviewed an extremely racist member of South Africa's Conservative Party, Clive Darby Lewis. Lewis was later implicated in the murder of Chris Hani, the leader of the South African Communist Party.

Other researchers have also had problems in countries with which the United States has a contentious relationship.

> The presence of a U.S. citizen changes the nature of almost any conversation in Cuba. For the vast majority of adult Cubans, both the political and personal understandings that they will articulate to a North American researcher about living in revolutionary Cuba are inevitably embedded in a discourse, however subtly, about the relative merits or demerits of Cuban socialism as compared to American capitalism. (Michalowski, 1996, p. 74)

Additionally, I intuited that my academic field – public administration - also affected some interviewees. When I was conducting research in South Africa in the early 1990s, if I had presented myself to black revolutionary interviewees as a public administration scholar, they would probably have suspected me as being complicit in their oppression. It was an advantage being a white American in this case. Because given South Africa's longstanding racial tensions, it was unlikely that black revolutionaries would speak with a white South African. Although within the past few years, public administration has become a very popular academic field with black South Africans, in the early 1990s it was anathema to them because of the field's association with the apartheid government. At that time, to describe oneself as a political scientist was more neutral and less charged.

Conversely in contemporary China, it is my impression that public administration is a much more accepted field than political science. Chinese scholars and practitioners have formed several public administration associations. Most of my interviewees had a positive view of the field of public administration. However, in many peoples' minds, the field of political science has very different connotations. Chinese university students are required to take political classes, but given the nature of Chinese society, these classes are not designed to encourage critical thought. Indeed, I interviewed several students who were highly critical of these classes and generally weary of anything political. Thus, it

was my view that it was less threatening for me to present myself as a public administration scholar in China.

Just who was I, am I, exactly? A public administration scholar or a political scientist? I changed my identity depending upon the context. Was it deception? Hunt estimates that during the 1960s and 1970 that one-third of all psychological and socio-psychological research involved deception (1982, p. 66). It is an ethical conundrum I continue to examine.

Maintaining Authenticity

At the beginning of the interview, I always introduced myself and provided my interviewee with a brief autobiography. I also told them about the purpose of my research and my political perspective. As Manning notes:

> A commitment to a subjectivist epistemology warrants a respondent-researcher discussion of personal attributes and assumptions that by their nature shape the research. Respondents, as the owners of the data, have a right to understand the lens (e.g., feminist standpoint, political perspectives) used to analyze the data and co-construct the interpretations. (1997, p. 103)

At least, that was my ideal way of beginning an interview. In most interviews, I hoped that by explaining about myself, my project and my perspectives interviewees would appreciate my authenticity. Liebermann notes, "Subjects in the field are suspicious of researchers anyway, and nothing is quite so apparent to them as inauthenticity" (1999, p. 51).

I tried to be authentic, but I do admit that in some instances I did omit information about my political perspective, particularly when I was interviewing people with extreme right wing views. I did feel some ambivalence about presenting myself in one way to some people and in another way to other people. As in the previously mentioned case, was I being inauthentic? Perhaps. However, as Wong notes, "I should have realized that as qualitative researchers, the ethics of ambiguity and ambivalence in research relationships will always be present and dependent on the local, strategic, and tactical conditions of the field (1998, pp.196-197). Although when an interviewee asked me about my views, I tried to respond frankly. Interestingly, in South Africa, when I interviewed white political activists of the extreme right, my interviewees never asked me about my political ideology. They may have assumed that since we shared the same skin color, we also shared similar political views.

In these cases, I wanted to learn about their life world and not put them on the defensive, if I could avoid it, since politics and race (two issues that in South Africa are inevitably intertwined) are such hot-button issues. In such a situation, the interviewer can play a catalytic role (Holloway & Jefferson, 1997, p. 60). Sometimes our discussions meandered, but it did provide me with some meaningful insights. Liebermann writes, "At a minimum, however, we must take the considerable time that is required to make contact with the life-world of our subjects, even if we choose not to make it a topic for scholarly reporting. Only in that way can a researcher avoid assembling the worst distortions of a people" (1999, p. 50). Although these discussions never directly resulted in an article, it

did increase my understanding of white racism in South Africa, which eventually led me to write an article on South African public administration, that critiqued its highly technical, extremely myopic and implicitly racist orientation (Hubbell, 1992).

Several researchers, particularly feminist researchers, who place a premium on getting close to their interviewees, have also struggled with this issue (Dua, 1979; Rollins, 1985; Schrijvers, 1993; Wolf, 1996). Wolf notes:

> Although we cannot hide our race or gender, there are other aspects of our identity that may be less obvious. Feminists have struggled with presenting and representing their selves and the problems, dilemmas, and contradictions of engaging in deception. This is one area in which our power and control offers us the choice to construct and (re) shape our selves to our subjects, playing on the different positionalities of the researcher and the researched. (1996, p. 11)

Furthermore, occasionally I became privy to the kind of information, emotions and intimacy I would not have encountered if I had employed another methodology – a questionnaire for instance. For example, during one interview a gang member confessed to me that he wanted to leave his gang and move overseas – an admission that he claimed would have resulted in his death if his fellow gang members learned of it. In this instance, I was mindful that "it is not uncommon for the researcher and respondent to form a type of relationship that gives the researcher privy information that could cause damage to the individual or group. Almost all strategies for data gathering have ethical dimensions (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993, p. 89).

A Lack of Political Consent

In 1999, I took a three-week trip to China for the purpose of exploring future research projects. I had been invited to a rural Chinese university by an academic colleague whom I had befriended while he was conducting research in the United States. During my initial stay, I learned of China's experiment with village democracy. I found this development to be extremely exciting and developed a research plan to study this phenomenon.

The following year, I made a one-month trip to China to discuss the grant proposal with university officials and American embassy personnel. It was my plan to follow up this initial trip with a four-month stay later in the academic year. The primary thrust of the grant proposal was to provide management training to selected village leaders chosen by the provincial Communist Party. The training was to be provided by members of my academic department and members of our affiliated Chinese university. I hoped that during the course of that training I would be able to conduct open-ended interviews with these village leaders. I also tried to make the grant attractive to Chinese university personnel by building in the opportunity for them to travel to the United States. In addition, I formulated an open-ended exchange agreement between the two universities, which officials at this university were anxious to sign. Unfortunately, I did not take into account two important factors: the unlikelihood of many Asians to say "no" definitively and the obstreperousness and suspicion of Communist Party officials. I was never told that I could not proceed with the project, but my Chinese counterparts also

never provided me with the necessary information to complete the grant application. Who nixed the grant? I don't know, but I suspect it was the local Communist Party officials.

In retrospect, I feel I was probably naïve in thinking I could have received approval from officials within a not free society for the purpose of offering management training. Judging from the comments made by the foreign affairs officer at the Chinese university I visited, I am also concerned that I may have faced an ethical dilemma when I wrote up my research. University foreign affairs officers in China typically act as the government's eyes and ears regarding their foreign guests. Although this foreign affairs officer had expressed trust in me, which I assumed meant that he thought I would not write anything critical about China, he made clear that he was wary of any colleagues I might include on this project, who were unknown to him.

Concluding Remarks

Conducting field research abroad can be both a challenging and a very rewarding experience. It requires flexibility and patience. The people I interviewed have enriched me by enhancing my own reflexivity and creativity. It also has provided me with more insight into the human condition as expressed from a variety of perspectives. At times, I have ventured up dead-ends, only to change the topic of my research. I have, indeed, encountered several false starts, suspicious interviewees and nearly impossible tasks, but made some serendipitous discoveries because of it.

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