LSE

Janine Bressmer   January 28th, 2020

Reflections on unlearning whiteness during research fieldwork

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When carrying out fieldwork, researchers may actively participate in the structural and physical power dynamics they aim to critique. Writing on her embodied experience and research into humanitarian security management in Ethiopia, Janine Bressmer addresses the importance of understanding a researcher's identity for the narratives it may create or overlook.

This post is part of the series Rethinking ethics and identity in fieldwork.

Walking into the office of a large humanitarian organisation in Addis Ababa, the ever-expanding capital city of Ethiopia, I noticed none of the

security guards asked whom I came to see or checked the contents of my overflowing backpack. After getting lost in the long, anonymous corridors, I found my informant in a small office with a little window facing a courtyard. He greeted me warmly and asked whether I had easily found his office. When I replied that I had simply strolled into the compound and navigated my way around autonomously, he laughed. 'You know, they assume you're a consultant here on official business… you're white, so they won't ask what you're doing here…'

I experienced this kind of security management throughout my fieldwork, where I look at the spatiality of humanitarian security management in Ethiopia. Time and again, I would walk through metal gates, revolving doors and security posts, only to be met with a nod or a formal 'hello', but rarely with questions on the purpose of my visit (important to note though that particularly in UN compounds and embassies I am often met with detailed questions of whom I intend to meet and an inspection of my belongings).

I had come to think that, in the context of my research, security measures in Addis Ababa may be at times lax, almost performative and solely to comply with risk mitigation frameworks. Back in Geneva in a workshop on fieldwork in divisive and violent contexts, a participant challenged my assumptions on security practices: 'you don't think these barriers were more invisible for you because you are white?' Indeed, she relayed a critical insight into how, as a result of my skin colour, I experienced security measures in very particular ways. I had failed to seriously consider how particular security measures may be applied and experienced differently, whether intentionally or not, by non-white visitors while they remain (at least partially) invisible for white visitors like me.

Barbed wire on top of a cement wall of a small guest house, Harar, Ethiopia. Credit: Janine Bressmer.

Being confronted by my own white privilege, however, led me to learn much more about security management specifically, and privilege and power in aid more broadly, than I had originally thought. Perhaps more importantly, though, this experience forced me to seriously engage with the contemporary necessity of decolonising academic and expert knowledge as well as fieldwork itself.

In fieldwork-based research, and particularly ethnographic methods, (white western) researchers may actively participate in the structural and physical power dynamics with which we aim to critically engage. For me, I had been aware of biases in security management that manifest in unequal power dynamics between 'international/expat' and 'local/national' staff. Not only do (mostly white) international staff enjoy a significant level of mobility, salary and access to organisational resources and processes, research shows that large amounts of security procedures are written without consideration for staff with diverse profiles (which includes gender, ethnicity, nationality and staff with disabilities).

As one example, a security manager pointed out to me that national staff in his organisation, who are in themselves not a homogenous group of people, have voiced concerns about the organisation's 9pm curfew put in place in their city; an area s/he has lived and worked in for years and previously returned home at their own leisure. A second example is housing. International staff are often allocated housing which conforms to strict safety and security guidelines (including metal grills on windows, outdoor lighting and security guards), while non-expat staff receive 'recommendations', or 'lessons learned', and must find housing on their own. Such procedures and protocols then do not take into account the equally valid demands and rights for a safe working environment of *all* staffers, whether they are in their own communities and countries or a different continent. However, I had failed to consider my own situated experience, not just while conducting fieldwork, but of actually *living* and potentially *re-enacting* particular security procedures as I moved around the city.

Gate on a public road leading to an international humanitarian organisation, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Credit: Janine Bressmer

When thinking through concepts such as objectivity and positionality, depending on where one stands in this debate, we can make the argument that the researchers' experiences are intricately linked to knowledge production. Or, we could argue that in order to understand the realities out there, we must delineate the embodied experiences we have from those of our research partners. This is a rather old but important debate. However, my recent fieldwork experience has led me to take seriously the ways that embodied practices of field research, including various (invisible) barriers we (do not) face when conducting fieldwork, play an important role in helping the researcher understand local realities, abstract organisational procedures and personal narratives.

When I then pass through security measures with apparent ease, I am confronted with *only one* experience of humanitarian security practices – those that apply to white (female) visitors/researchers. The experiences of others are equally, if not more, real and important, yet I cannot claim to have an embodied understanding of these sets of practices and procedures. I can only see, feel and touch security practices as they apply to me.

While I was not aware of it at the time, I actually experienced processes that I came to Ethiopia to understand: the different ways that spatial layouts and associated procedures on security feed into our understandings of security in the humanitarian endeavour. How I experienced and felt security was one of ease of movement, (mostly) open doors and transparent walls. However, this singular narrative, perpetuated by security protocols often void of context, is untrue and indeed perpetuates a false narrative of equality in how security is practised and experienced in the country. Instead, while researching where power is located in security management, I had found parts of

my project data while contrasting my own experience with those of non-expat staff.

Whether or not we as scholars want to acknowledge it, we are always embedded in particular practices of power. When we do not take seriously the researcher's located positionality, we may write narratives that fail to acknowledge the multiplicity of voices and perspectives we encounter in the field and thus sidestep important debates on fieldwork practices, particularly of white researchers. The workshop participant, then, pushed me to engage seriously with my own (limited) situated knowledge as potentially (re)producing problematic power dynamics and to critically investigate my 'self' as it relates to my research practices, both while conducing fieldwork and when 'back home'.

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