

SCHOLARLY REVIEW ESSAY

Research Ethics, Fieldwork, and African Studies

Lyn Johnstone, ed. *The Politics of Conducting Research in Africa: Ethical and Emotional Challenges in the Field*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. \$104.19. Paper. ISBN: 978-3-030-07052-6.

An Ansoms, Aymar Nyenyezi Bisoka, and Susan Thomson, eds. *Field Research in Africa: The Ethics of Researcher Vulnerabilities*. Woodbridge: James Currey, 2021. \$29.95. Paper. ISBN: 9781847012692.

Oscar Abedi Dunia, Anju Oseema Maria Toppo, and James B. M. Vincent, eds. *Facilitating Researchers in Insecure Zones: Towards a More Equitable Knowledge Production*. London: Bloomsbury, 2023. \$20.96. Paper. ISBN: 9781350265653.

In recent years, there has been a noticeable uptick in efforts to address the ethical, methodological, and security challenges of conducting field research. In fact, an entire scholarly community has emerged from different pockets of area and conflict studies to develop and share a body of literature and foster interactive forums to advance this important area of study.¹ Much of this work builds on the influential accounts of individual researchers (Wood 2006), which has developed into more systematic categories for the myriad issues of fieldwork (Sriram et al. 2009), as well as frameworks to understand researcher-related, subject-related, and result-related problems (Baele et al. 2018). Some have noted that the challenges associated with ethics, security, and methods are “amplified in conflict zones” (Cramer, Hammond, and Pottier 2011). Others have observed the African context in particular may require its own approach (Thomson, Ansoms, and Murison 2013), prompting the journal *African Affairs* to dedicate space to a series of research notes that tackle fieldwork in particular (Cheeseman, Death, and Whitfield 2017).

The three books reviewed in this essay collect a wide variety of experiences of conducting fieldwork in Africa, with one volume including the India case for comparative leverage. Taken together, the books address the unpredictable and sometimes “messy” nature of fieldwork in Africa. The volumes also pay particular attention to the emotional dimensions of fieldwork and how they shape a given researcher’s collection and interpretation of data. They also consider whose voices are and ought to be centered in knowledge production about the continent and the power dynamics between researchers, subjects, and interlocutors. In what follows, I briefly situate these books within a few key concepts associated with research ethics and fieldwork. I then review the books

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chronologically to show how some of the thinking has developed. I close by offering some important reflections on the opportunities and limitations of these current efforts to take research ethics in Africa more seriously.

Some key concepts

To proceed, some conceptual clarity is in order. By research ethics, I refer here to the basic principles that protect research subjects from potential harm, which are common requirements from most academic institutions and administered through committees such as Institutional Review Boards (IRBs). Ethics are largely based on the Belmont Principles, which include respect for persons (acknowledge autonomy, ensure protection), beneficence (maximize benefits, minimize harms), and justice (a fair distribution of benefits and burdens), and serve as a common reference point for all researchers (US Department of Health and Human Services 1979).

On its own, the notion of research ethics is important, but it becomes more complicated when factoring in security and methodology in fieldwork. When we speak of security in the field, we mean operational procedures to protect the researcher from potential harm, and to safeguard data. And by methodology, we mean how researchers determine what data are required and how to acquire them, and the measures taken to protect the integrity of the research process itself. Yet it is unclear how we define “danger” in the field (Lee-Treweek and Linkogle 2000), and it is an open question if “good data” is even collectable in contentious environments (Vlassenroot 2006).

There is also an additional pair of important concepts that thread through ethics, methods, and security. First, *positionality*, refers to “the demographic characteristics and personal backgrounds of a researcher’s identity and their impact on interactions with research participants” (Fujii 2017). Second, *reflexivity* means “a keen awareness of, and theorizing about, the role of the self in all phases of the research process” (Schwartz-Shea 2014). These concepts encourage researchers to take stock of how they construct and situate their identity in the field, and how power, privilege, and emotions can shape the collection and interpretation of data.

Three books

I begin with Johnston’s edited volume, *The Politics of Conducting Research in Africa*, which features essays written by an interdisciplinary collection of doctoral students. Rather than focus on research ethics per se, each chapter details the authors’ different experiences with *positionality* in a variety of field settings in Africa. The goal is to highlight some of the “mess and uncertainties” of fieldwork that are often consigned to the “cutting room floor” in favor of more sanitized social science scholarship. The contributions address key questions about how the identity of the researcher influences how they are perceived by their research subjects, and by extension, how *positionality* can change over time. The role of a researcher’s emotions in fieldwork is also given some attention, as is

the relationship between positionality and data collection, particularly when access to data is difficult. The contributions consider the nature of fieldwork in contentious environments, which might require a reassessment of certain methodologies.

Among the stronger chapters are those that deal with the insider-outsider dimension of positionality. In Chapter Two, Nungari Mwangi reflects on her experiences going “back home” to study rural flower growers in Kenya, where access was based on a shared value of knowledge production, or “reciprocity in fieldwork.” In Chapter Three, Christine van Hooft identifies as a “hybrid” researcher gaining access to a Ugandan government agency in which she once worked as a foreign consultant. Jumping ahead to Chapter Seven, Langton Miriyoga shows slightly less success in operating along the insider-outsider spectrum when “back home” becomes complicated for a Zimbabwean migrant to South Africa studying these very migrant communities. In a less convincing way, Maddy Gupta-Wright contributes to the “multi-positionality” discussion in Chapter Four, with a focus on her own changing positionality over time as she changed hats from medical doctor to medical anthropology researcher in Malawi.

The remaining chapters tackle other themes. In Chapter Five, Lynn Johnstone reflects on how gendered power dynamics were refracted through her experiences in Rwanda and Zimbabwe, where her decision to engage in “flirting” was both an asset and a liability to the research process. The role of emotions takes center stage in Chapter Six, with Kerstin Tomiak’s account of conducting research among Southern Sudanese refugees. In Chapter Eight, Carlin H. Stamm’s research in Namibia’s protected areas highlights the importance of developing relationships with “gatekeepers” in the field to facilitate research. Alternatively, Joshua Pritchard shows in Chapter Ten how these relationships can become more complicated in settings like Zimbabwe, where authoritarian state politics can creep into academic politics. Finally, in one of the book’s more compelling entries, Elizaveta Volkova reflects in Chapter Nine upon how she coped with the possibility of full on failed fieldwork in Senegal, where access to research subjects and data were thwarted at many turns, only to be overcome with tenacity.

A key strength of this volume is that doctoral students, not veteran scholars, are the stars of the show. Many, if not most, graduate programs do not sufficiently train junior researchers for the ethical, methodological, and security challenges of fieldwork in Africa, let alone prime them with the thorny questions surrounding positionality. What if all PhD students were required—or at the very least strongly encouraged—to write about their experiences in Africa and these accounts were widely shared among Africanists? To be sure, there is no full guarantee that better fieldwork would result—but it might, on balance. Moreover, there is a risk that such activities would become no more than a rote box-checking exercise appropriated by ethics boards. Nevertheless, the fact that doctoral students are providing transparent and unvarnished accounts of fieldwork they conducted at the *beginning* of their scholarly journey is encouraging.

Substantively, the collection covers a lot of ground, although the chapters could have benefited from being bundled more thematically. Moreover, the book is missing a concluding chapter that could have tied things together and pointed to concrete directions for further discussion. This is a missed opportunity since several chapters portend deeper dives into significant themes covered by the wider literature on research ethics and fieldwork. For instance, the role of “emotional labor” in fieldwork merits more attention, particularly how researchers must navigate between compartmentalizing emotional responses to their subjects’ experiences in order to exercise self-care in the field and marshaling these responses towards better research. In addition, all the positionality-centered self-evaluations in the world might not be sufficient when conducting research in authoritarian settings where power asymmetries put the researcher on their back foot and where security concerns eclipse all else.

I now turn to *Field Research in Africa* by Ansoms et al., a volume that marks significant progress in how we consider the role of a researcher’s emotions in doing fieldwork, particularly in contentious environments and with vulnerable populations as research subjects. As such, this book normalizes the role of the “Self” in developing and the ability to distinguish between emotions and feelings at all stages of the research process. Yet on balance, the “tyranny of knowledge production,” the incentive structures of academic publishing, and the pursuit of academic careers often discourage the mere mention of fieldwork’s emotional effects. In contrast, the authors of this volume’s chapters place emotions at the center of how researchers can, and should at bare minimum, practice reflexivity and positionality. By extension, this gives way to more ethical research practices by slowing things down just enough to pay more attention to issues of epistemology, method, and methodology.

An Introduction and a Conclusion bookend seven substantive chapters. In Chapter One, Gino Vlasanou discusses how he leveraged what he calls the “skin connection” between himself as a Beninois researcher, his Canadian university’s ethics committee, and how emotions shaped his research on intercommunal violence in Central African Republic. Taking the “insider” theme one step deeper, Emery Mushagalusa Mudinga explains in Chapter Two that even Congolese researchers in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) still experience emotions that require purposeful and strict security protocols to navigate the sensitive networks of land grabbing. Chapter Three’s contribution is Ghaliya N. Djelloul’s story of her research in Algeria, where a “coming home” experience was refracted through her conflicting emotional roles and ethical lenses as an Algerian daughter and feminist researcher. In Chapter Four, Rosette Sifa Vuninga provides a variation of Mudinga’s experience as a female, Congolese researcher studying fellow Congolese, but this time with immigrant communities in Capetown, where ethnic cleavages replicate themselves and pose particular emotional challenges to ethical research. And Chapter Five shows how anxiety serves as a security check vis-à-vis accessing insider networks of research intermediaries, where security risks reign and the subject at hand involves violence, as Aymar Nyenyezi Bisoka describes in his work on elite networks and land in DRC.

In Chapter Six, An Ansoms reflects on twenty years of research in Rwanda and how emotions intersect with changing relationships with research subjects over time, when lines between interlocutors and friends are often blurred and thus pose ethical issues. Finally, Chapter Seven showcases the ethical dilemmas experienced by Susan Thompson as both a researcher on Rwanda and an activist on behalf of expatriate Rwandese in her immediate community, whose divergent roles pose challenges to how we think about dissemination of research.

Field Research in Africa makes two key contributions. First, the call to center emotions in all stages of the research process is a welcome corrective to a long overlooked dimension of fieldwork in which so few researchers are sufficiently trained in advance. In other words, while maintaining objective distance from research sites and subjects is probably wise practice, it is also ok to sit with one's emotional responses to these experiences rather than subordinate them to a sort of "dogma of dispassion." Second, the book quite purposefully emphasizes the voices of African scholars who are conducting research on the continent. This represents a positive shift within broader efforts to "decolonize African Studies" away from Western-centric views of African politics and society. Yet the chapters in this volume do not just superficially address this shift by way of additive inclusion of African perspectives. Rather, their perspectives engage the deeper questions of knowledge production, with a deliberate awareness of who has the power to define what topics are studied and how.

The collection, however, does have a blind spot. Taken together, the authors of this volume's chapters all argue in the same direction: that researchers should, at bare minimum, deliberately engage in reflexivity and positionality, with a particular emphasis on how these things are refracted through emotions. This is all well and fine. Yet it remains unclear how these practices automatically translate into more ethical work. It is naturally assumed that if a researcher interrogates the Self, then all will be fine, but it is not clearly defined how one gets there. In the service of ethical research, the explicit rejection of positivism in favor of interpretivism (141) therefore gives me some pause, only because of the difficulties associated with measuring and quantifying "how much" a given researcher should engage the Self and whether or not this is sufficient, or even if being sufficient is even knowable without some sort of metric.

Finally I turn to *Facilitating Researchers in Conflict Zones*. The title is unintentionally misleading, suggesting that the book serves a kind of guide for researchers in conflict zones. Instead, the term "facilitating researchers" refers to the actors on the ground who work with "contracting researchers," many of whom are outsiders and depend upon their counterparts and the range of academic, logistical, and administrative tasks they perform. This volume does not just represent an effort to recognize the roles of facilitating researchers in knowledge production in academia. It is also about acknowledging the persistent power asymmetries and glaring inequities that exist between and among these key sets of actors, as well as issues of security vulnerabilities. Growing out of a number of field-based and virtual workshops, each chapter in this volume is authored by a team of facilitating researchers based in Sierra Leone, DRC, and India. They share their experiences in working with contracting researchers of different stripes, not all of which were necessarily negative.

The introductory chapter anchors the volume conceptually and transparently outlines how the project emerged as a collaborative effort between facilitating researchers in Sierra Leone, DRC, and India, and a number of Sweden-based scholars—Oscar Abedi Dunia, Maria Erikson Baaz, Swati Parashar, Anju Oseema Maria Toppo, Mats Utas, James B.M. Vincent, and Karin Elfving. To be consistent with the reviews above, in what follows I summarize each chapter with full recognition to each team of authors.

Chapter Two, authored by James B.M. Vincent, Abdul Hakeem Mansaray, Abu Bakar Jaward, Marian Anita Rogers, and Alisha Kamara, considers the different backgrounds and profiles of facilitating researchers that work not just for contracting researchers, but also nongovernmental organizations and aid agencies. In Chapter Three, Oscar Abedi Dunia, Eric Batumike-Banyanga, Stanislas Bisimwa, John Ferekani Lulindi, Bienvenu Mukungilwa, Francine Mudunga, Lievin Mukingi, and Darwin Rukanyaga Assumani consider the myriad roles of the facilitating researcher and say the quiet part out loud: no facilitating researchers, no knowledge production. Anju Oseema Maria Toppo discusses in Chapter Four patterns of broken promises regarding remuneration and recognition, which can ripple through communities and hang facilitating researchers out to dry.

Chapter Five touches on what in my estimation is one of the most important issues—that of security. Oscar Abdeti Dunia, Elisée Cirhuza, Pascal Kizee Imili, Evariste Mahamba, Jérémie Mapatano, and Lebon Mulimbi explain that insecurity is not just about the threats that emanate from conflict zones (which facilitating researchers are responsible for monitoring), but the economic precariousness of working as a facilitating researcher who must often bear more out-of-pocket costs than recognized by contracting researchers. In Chapter Six, Anju Oseema Maria Toppo takes us beyond the North/South divide in assessing the extractive and exploitative roles of contracting researchers, many of whom come from within the national contexts where the research is taking place and engage in bad behavior. Finally, Chapter Seven takes a break from discussing the harm that can be done by research relationships and applies a sanguine view by acknowledging how and when facilitating researchers can benefit from these experiences.

In addition to giving a voice to a key set of actors, there are other contributions of this volume. The first is conceptual—interrogating the standard nomenclature that identifies actors on the ground as “fixers” or “brokers” or “interlocutors” and reframing it far less pejoratively and far more accurately as “facilitating researchers,” who often end up holding the contracting researchers’ hands in the field. Moreover, “contracting researcher” is neutral enough to capture embedded power dynamics without necessarily assuming they are white, Western/Northern scholars—in fact there are multiple vectors of privilege captured by this term. Second, the volume offers an elegant distillation of the main tensions between research ethics, social science methodology, and operational security that are refracted through the relationships within research teams in contentious environments. There is no seamless relationship between knowledge production and who gets the credit, who gets represented, and how. Above all, inequalities of power and status can play out in a form of

what I would call “security apartheid” where contracting researchers’ lives are assumed to be more valuable than those of facilitating researchers.

Finally, the book tries to be practical. The concluding chapter identifies the structural conditions that have given rise to the issues the preceding chapters identify. These include long-term colonial legacies and how they merge with the incentive structures of contemporary academic careers. It also offers a few pieces of advice on how to move forward. The authors suggest that the default setting for fieldwork in insecure zones should be collaborative, and many types of facilitating research should be considered as coauthorship. They also call for more transparency about how research is funded, and even suggest that principal investigators need not even waste time and jet fuel by traveling to the field if there is a solid team on the ground. Who is to oversee this transformation? Funding agencies, ethics boards, academic publishers, and above all, facilitating researchers themselves as a project of collective bargaining.

Emergent themes

Taken together, these three volumes assemble valuable insights into some of the thornier questions surrounding field research in Africa. How should researchers navigate power dynamics with their subjects and the actors on the ground that facilitate their work? What assumptions do researchers bring to the field about themselves and their wider research environment? To varying degrees, these books also address the practical and logistical challenges of conducting fieldwork not just in Africa but more generally, particularly the tensions that emerge between research ethics, research methodology, and operational security. Above all, these works highlight the tradeoffs between efficiency and equity in knowledge production and the extent to which current ethical frameworks are fit for purpose. And, perhaps inadvertently, the many authors engaged in this critical work expose the limitations of deploying the constructs of reflexivity and positionality as constructs to help solve the very problems they identify.

If the internal dynamics of research teams often go overlooked, the volumes reviewed here provide more transparent discussions about how data collection and risk management in the field are refracted through team power asymmetries in ways that can erode basic research ethics. The power disparities between “contracting researchers” and “facilitating researchers” will continue to silence individuals who fear retribution or career damage for speaking up. This issue is particularly salient in politically unstable contexts, where the consequences of ethical lapses can be as severe as when the risks associated with fieldwork are not evenly distributed. For instance, people that remain on the ground can face ongoing dangers while lacking the exit strategies available to their international counterparts. The main implication here is that a revised “duty of care” ethic ought to be extended more comprehensively to all those that participate in knowledge production at all levels. At a bare minimum, all research team members at the outset should have a solid understanding of what support they can expect and realistic expectations of risks.


Yet if this dialogue is to be at all meaningful, it ought to precede field research and play out in the context of ethics review. But conventional processes such as Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) do not always capture the dilemmas of doing research in complex environments (Campbell 2017; Bhattacharya 2014). In a perfect world, ethics provide a moral framework for conducting research responsibly, considering key factors such as the privacy of subjects and even broader societal impacts. Yet the stakes can be much higher and the power dynamics much different in insecure research environments. And the default minimalist view of research ethics often reduces them to rote box-ticking exercises to meet baseline institutional requirements. This sidesteps an opportunity to address a broader spectrum of ethical challenges raised in the volumes under review. Until then, treating ethics as a procedural hurdle rather than a dynamic, continuous process discourages meaningful engagement with security risks and power imbalances. This approach also can produce and reproduce fundamental biases that can skew data collection and lead to a limited understanding of complex issues. To address these issues, something more “fit for purpose” is needed—a broader, more integrated approach that encourages genuine dialogue and reflection not just at the ethics review stage, but at all stages of the research process.

Finally, if fieldwork in Africa is indeed messy and ethics review boards are not fit for purpose, a primary strategy for researchers has increasingly involved engagement with the “handmaidens of cultural relativity,” that is reflexivity and positionality (Thomson et al. 2013). This is not to be glib or to make light of the earnest endeavors of those who genuinely, critically examine their identities and the impact of power dynamics on their work (Mazurana, Gale, and Jacobsen 2013; Thaler 2019). But how do we know if we are doing it right? How much is enough? Are we to become cognitive behavioral specialists or experts in neuroscience where we can ably trace the connection between self-reflection in fieldwork, our vagus nerve, and good research ethics? These are legitimate questions to be taken up by those who seem to argue that a little reflexivity and positionality, while going a long way, is a magic bullet. There is also an additional risk here that these concepts become yet another box-ticking exercise where researchers “do” reflexivity and positionality. In such cases, the process may even become counterproductive and uncritical, potentially lost in an arms race of competitive reflexivity and positionality that is more a self-referential exercise in academic vanity than one of practical necessity and professional ethics. I suspect that this is not what advocates for these approaches intend.

Conclusion

In sum, fieldwork in Africa poses a range of challenges for research teams. Underlying these challenges are the research ethics that define the moral boundaries within which scholars operate. To be sure, research ethics “happen all the time” (Fujii 2012; Blee and Currier 2011). And paying attention to our identities as researchers and the power asymmetries we often bring to bear while in the field certainly matters all the time. But the evolving social, political,

and technological landscape of knowledge production demands a more holistic and inclusive understanding of ethical research, not just in Africa, but anywhere scholars conduct fieldwork. Correspondingly, the books reviewed here, with healthy doses of candor and a few sprinkles of common sense, seek to align ethical discussions and practices with the realities of fieldwork in politically and socially challenging environments. Together they implicitly advocate for addressing the unacknowledged deficits and unspoken assumptions associated with fieldwork in Africa such as equity, protection, as well as broader community well-being. The next steps ought to be a very practical reconsideration of research ethics that can adapt to the complex realities in the field that fully integrate comprehensive principles of respect and justice for all involved in the research process.

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Note

1. See the ARC Bibliography, Advancing Research on Conflict, <https://advancingconflictresearch.com/new-page-1>; Research in Difficult Settings <http://conflictfieldresearch.colgate.edu>; Johanna Rodehau-Noack <https://rodehaunoack.com/resources>

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