Research in post-war settings

Darfur, Sudan
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Our world

↗ Research methods: a world of prescription, judgement, and inclusion/exclusion

↗ The best advice I received on methodology: find the most appropriate method for the job, justify it, and then do it well.

↗ Implies there are several possible tools which can be used – not just "one perfect answer" amid a mass of pretenders which will lead you astray

↗ Not a game of snakes and ladders

↗ You can't keep everyone happy – but it's nice if your methods seem acceptable to "reasonable people".

↗ You may have to learn to live with the disappointment of the methodological purists (who are used to being disappointed and disagree wildly with each other anyway).

A key question

↗ **How do we listen?**

  ↗ How well?

  ↗ Do we hear what we're **not** expecting to hear?

  ↗ Can we hear things which **don't** fit our theory?

  ↗ Can we hear the voices of those who may not be able speak directly or are disempowered?

Alan Johnston on reporting for radio

↗ So much of the job is about trying to find the imagination within yourself to try to see, to really see, the world through the eyes of the people in the story. Not just through the eyes of the Palestinian who has just had his home smashed. But also through the eyes of the three young Israelis in a tank who smashed it. Why did they see that as a reasonable thing to do? What was going through their minds as their tank went through the house?

↗ If you can come close to answering questions like that, then you'll be giving the whole picture...

- Reprinted in the *Guardian*, 18 June 2007

Alan Johnston on reporting for radio

↗ And when you are with one side from the conflict, you have got to put to them the very best arguments of the other side - the toughest questions...

↗ And that business of putting yourself in the shoes of the people in the story can only be done if you listen and listen to them. If the people involved are willing to put up with your endless presence, then the details start to emerge.

- Reprinted in the *Guardian*, 18 June 2007

Relationships

↗ Analysis is based on network of relationships (not just researcher-subject).

↗ These relationships do indeed involve inequalities on a number of different dimensions, such as power, information, access, and resources.

↗ We must incorporate an understanding of these dynamics into our research design, reflexivity, and analysis.

↗ However that does not mean we get stuck at a one-dimensional or even binary analysis of "powerful researchers" and "exploited research subjects".

Background

- This is based on
  - Qualitative and quantitative research in Liberia and Sierra Leone with ex-combatants and affected communities recovering from war (2007-10), and on
  - Field research in Darfur during the conflict (2004-05)

- What does that just amount to? Establishing credentials or hierarchies within our research world?

Pilot discussion with ex-combatants, Makeni, Sierra Leone

↗ Not a deterministic model: this aspect is to be integrated into a holistic understanding of the context, interests, perceptions and dynamics.

↗ Like all relationships, they can include
  - ↗ power
  - ↗ interests
  - ↗ perceptions
  - ↗ assumptions/preconceptions
  - ↗ gender
  - ↗ language
  - ↗ communication
  - ↗ stereotypes
  - ↗ etc.

Do we recognise the agency of displaced people building new homes?

Does it suit our narrative?

Awareness

⬀The first stage is to build awareness of these relationships and inequalities.

⬀Awareness can help us to frame the research process, and reflect on it usefully afterwards – especially when we are making generalisations from our interpretations of what we think we have observed.

Burnt out village, Jebel Mara, Darfur (2004)

↗Postionality - understanding where we're coming from - is part of the equation, but not all of it.

↗Who is "the field"? Try turning the term around to see how it feels.

↗Trauma may be a reality for those being interviewed. Would we recognise it and the local coping mechanisms if we came across it?

↗We may be seen as part of an investigation or transitional justice initiative.

"The act of writing things down, having forms or paperwork, or recording them, is linked to power and status in these situations. It also raises questions about being seen as [a] representative of the international community, the government, [or] the UN, so people may respond to you as a potential provider of resources, or a target for their anger. Or one may be seen as linked [to] the Special Court, raising suspicion and reticence, especially since the arrest of Chief Hinga Norman. Introducing ourselves as students is important in trying to overcome these perceptions, but they can persist despite stating several times that we are not NGO or government employees."
(Excerpt from contemporaneous research journa, Bo, Sierra Leone,l for 9th September 2008)

Research assistants

↗Acknowlegement of role, importance and perspective of research assistants and translators.

↗These play as a key role as intermediaries and cultural interpreters, but their existence (whatever about their input) is rarely acknowledged.

↗Advice on local protocol and hierarchies.

↗For example

"The welcoming and open nature of the community at New Gerihun (Bo) has had a significant and positive impact on our efforts. It was certainly affected by adherence to local protocol, and in particular the approach to the Section Chief and his unequivocal endorsement. It may have been a function of the community's experience in having been consulted by NGOs in the past, and the fact that certain community members had worked for or interacted with NGOs, so they were familiar with engaging with them or being consulted.

"... In fact, Hennink (2007) sets out a multitude of reasons for doing this (describing it in terms of local hierarchies, and respecting local protocol). Not least is the fact that they may provide some one to assist you in their area, a role which [a local teacher] and his wife effectively filled, in the knowledge that our work had the blessing of the Section Chief. LJ [research assistant] made sure to mention the chief's approval of our work when we were subsequently meeting people and asking them to help us or take part in groups or interviews.

"As our meeting [with him] was carried out in front of an audience, and met with his approval, word spread quickly in the community about the research project."

(Excerpt from contemporaneous research journal, Bo, Sierra Leone, for 9th September 2008)
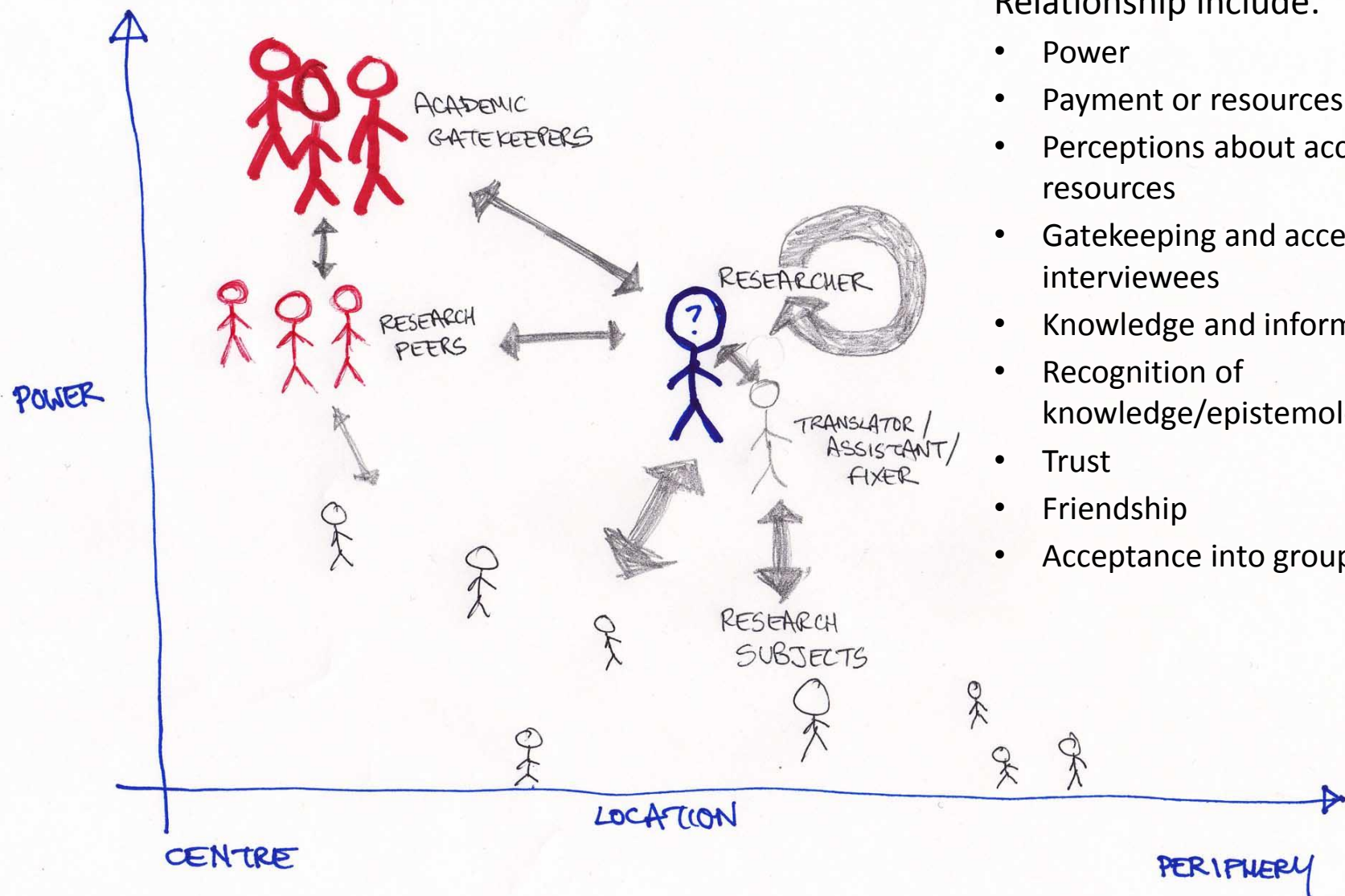
Relationship include:

- Power
- Payment or resources
- Perceptions about access to resources
- Gatekeeping and access to interviewees
- Knowledge and information
- Recognition of knowledge/epistemologies
- Trust
- Friendship
- Acceptance into group

Focus Groups

Key themes from Focus Groups

Word frequency (www.wordle.net)

Corruption mentioned spontaneously

- "They sat on our money and squandered it."

    Focus Group A, Bo, Sierra Leone

- "Then some of our commanders took our arms and gave them to civilians who went to disarm, and gave them the money. That was what they were doing."

    Focus Group M, Monrovia, Liberia

- "Unless you bribe, you will not get your allowances. Even [to get] your papers to show you are qualified for driving, you have to bribe."

    Focus Group B, Bo, Sierra Leone

Writing as power

- "They even came and wrote down our names, and they carried those names [away]."

- "Yes, they listened to me, and everything was written on paper."

- "The NGO came to us and gave us the information. They used to come, write our name, and ask us all what work we wanted to do."

- Focus Groups in Lawalazu, Lofa County, Liberia

What we are not doing

- "Proving a theory" - confirmation bias
- Taking on the identity of the people we study (as opposed to understanding them)
- Campaigning
- Competing
- Apologising or seeking approval

What we are doing

- Listening on many levels – to contradictory voices, to all kinds of data
- Engaged in an iterative process
- Forming and testing hypotheses continually – and ruthlessly
- Being alert to the dangers of confirmation bias
- Seeing a distinction between intellectual rigour, and rigidity
- Recognising those contradictions and working with them
- Avoiding the lure of simple answers, especially if they are psychologically satisfying
- Maintaining self awareness and reflection

Do…

- Give credit to local research (and listen to them)
- Recognise the role of translators and assistants
- Try to understand "local protocol" and cultural sensitivities
- Continue to question assumptions relentlessly (yours and others')
- Listen "between the lines"
- Be open to being surprised
- Remember to ask open-ended questions and flipped questions
- Be aware of "research fatigue"

Don't...

- Compete with other researchers for "authenticity"

- Put yourself in danger (or others of course)

- Forget "whose conflict it is anyway"

- Disturb relationships unnecessarily for other researchers

- Forget that people may be reluctant to talk in front of others (e.g. commander – gap but dynamic within focus groups)
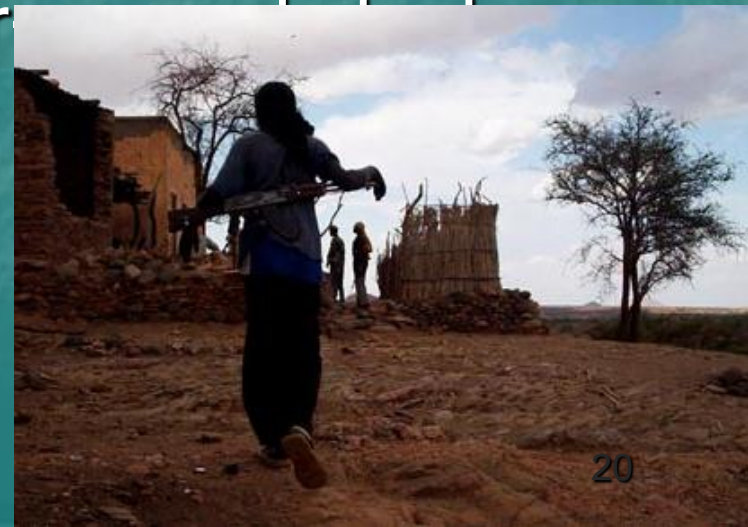
Some conclusions (1 of 2)

- This shouldn't deter us from doing good research.

- We can't wish away or ignore the inequalities, nor can their presence mean we never do good research. But **awareness, reflexivity, and open acknowledgement** should help.

- Making these relationships and dynamics **explicit** helps to avoid some of the pitfalls.

- Being explicit can also **influence the results** - if we have to explain or justify something, it may affect the research design, or the way we interpret the data.

Some (more) conclusions (2 of 2)

- It's a process which can be messy, challenging, exhilarating, satisfying, rewarding, troubling

- We can learn to become "comfortable with the confusion"

- It can engender understanding, and new knowledge

- Prepare to be surprised

- It can change us and how we look at the world

- And then the hard part: how to make sense of it and communicate to a wider audience.