

## Tip Sheet: Reflecting on Our Role as Researchers

Location, location, location...

No, this is not simply your favorite Real Estate Agent's mantra. It is a lively force in contemporary academic debates. Perhaps it was at one time acceptable to assume a neutral, omniscient, universal approach that would render objective, scientific facts. However, in the contemporary context of "posts" – postmodernism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, postpositivism – such assumptions are now not only considered out-dated, but also wrong-headed. Scholars, and that includes you, are expected to place themselves in their work – to interrogate position.

In their book, Telling Truth about History, authors Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob assert:

"Our version of objectivity concedes the impossibility of any research being neutral and accepts the fact that knowledge seeking involves a lively contentious struggle among diverse groups of truth-seekers."<sup>1</sup>

Does this mean there are no truths, no facts, and no such thing as objectivity? Why does it matter and how can we move ahead to do research on such seemingly contested grounds? The key for us to begin answering these questions, and many others, is for us to critically reflect on our role as a researcher and to state our perspectives (our biases), approaches, limitations, and assumptions upfront. If we fail to do so, we implicitly assume the universality of our positions.

All researchers have "biases." We come with them and cannot escape them. Gender, language, age, class, race, sighted / blind, etc. affect how we analyze and interact with the world. We need to be clear about our biases and appreciate that while they locate and to some extent limit us, they are also a perfectly normal part of scholarly endeavors. We want them to shape us, but not keep us from recognizing the possibilities beyond their limitations. We must also acknowledge that who we are may keep us from doing some kinds of research.

When you are abroad, while you may be completely ecstatic about your research topic, some people may not want or be able to talk to you. One of your tasks is to overcome these barriers in an ethically responsible way. Consider these factors when designing your interview protocols or your questionnaires:

1. In some cases, as an undergraduate or young person you are too unimportant. Perhaps your status is too low for you to be able to interview central governmental officials.
2. In some cases, your privilege and power as an educated person, as an American, as a wealthy person, etc. are an issue for others. You may be intimidating to others.
3. In some cases, personal and political barriers or differences exist. It may be difficult for a young woman to interview older men, for example.
4. In some cases, personal connection with the individual matters.

These issues demonstrate the importance of critically reflecting on your research, your role in it, and your relationship to the people with whom you are interacting. As Dr. Bennis points out,

*"Beginners should come to terms with the fact that idealism and caring, although laudatory, do not qualify them for research. Indeed beginners are typically very ill equipped to "help." The better strategy is to reflect seriously on one's experiences, learn as much as possible and bring that learning back to one's participation as a powerful global citizen. The most important thing anyone can bring to international research is a healthy respect for local people, local knowledge, and local people's strategies to define and resolve the dilemmas they face."*

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Merle Rubin's review of the work, Christian Science Monitor, April 11, 1994.

## Faculty Example:

Many of us will be limited by discipline, language, time, and training, among others.

Jeanne Penvenne is a **foreigner** among local people in Mozambique. She is **white** in a predominantly black society and **old** in a predominantly young society. She is **highly academically educated** in a society with a **tiny academic elite**. She is **wealthy** and privileged in a predominantly **poor** city. She develops and conveys history and research in **written forms**, whereas the majority population in Mozambique functions within **oral forms** – spoken and preformed. The majority does not read any language. She conducts most of her life in Mozambique in **Portuguese** whereas most Mozambicans conduct their lives in **Mozambican national languages**. She is a woman who wants to know about women.

Why should anyone want to talk to her? How will she be able to understand what people say to her? How can she know that what she “hears” is what people intended to “say” to her? When Penvenne writes up [probably in English] her understanding of what people “said” to her would any of the people whose history she purports to convey recognize it as their own? Does this mean she should not even try? Will the history she eventually writes up be valid? Will it be the same history urban women migrants in Maputo would tell? Will Penvenne tell it the same way urban migrant women would tell it? Is that the point?

For further resources on interrogating location, the impact of power and privilege in research, constructions of knowledge, and reflecting on your role as a researcher read the following resources. Some are posted in the IRN resource library, others are located in the Tisch library.

[Michael Bennish Director of the Africa Centre in Mtubatuba, South Africa offers insightful tips and recommendations to conducting ethical research. While his points are geared toward Africa, they are applicable for nearly any location abroad. \(Link to Bennish Principles\)](#)

Altheide, D.L. & Johnson, J.M. (1994). '*Criteria for Assessing Interpretive Validity in Qualitative Research*' in N. K.

Bonnell, V. & Hunt, L. (eds.) (1999) Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture, Berkeley, Univ. of CA.

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Denzin & Lincoln, Y.S. (eds.) Handbook of Qualitative Research. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Lecocq, B. (2002). "*Fieldwork Ain't Always Fun: Public and Hidden Discourse on Fieldwork*," History in Africa, Vol. 29:273-282.

McIntosh, P. (1990). '*White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*'. Independent School, pp. 33-36.

Mishler, E. (1990). 'Validation in Inquiry-Guided Research', *Harvard Education Review*, vol. 60, (4): 415-42.

Phillips, D.C. (1990). *'Subjectivity and Objectivity: An Objective Inquiry'* in E. Eisner and A. Peshkin (editors) Qualitative Inquiry: The Continuing Debate. New York: Teachers College Press.