RESEARCHING REFUGEES: PREOCCUPATIONS
WITH POWER AND QUESTIONS OF GIVING

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The phenomenon of forced migration challenges its researchers to tackle complex questions about the ethics of conducting research in the face of human suffering. The issue of giving assistance to the people included in one’s research is an inescapable dilemma for anthropologists working in a world of inequality and injustice. This article argues in favour of opening up honest and self-critical reflection on this dilemma and on the presupposed power relations between ‘researcher’ and ‘researched’.

Keywords: young refugees, Uganda, methodology, research ethics, assistance.

For nearly three years I lived in Kampala, the capital of Uganda, where I conducted research among young men who had fled war, insecurity and the absence of future prospects in southern Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia and Eritrea. Throughout the research and writing, I tussled with ethical and epistemological issues, many of which sprang from the specific context and content of my research. This article focuses on questions of power and on the methodological and ethical questions tied up with the issue of giving assistance.

When I started the research in 1998, literature on urban refugees was almost non-existent. I decided on an exploratory study about why young refugees came to Kampala, and how they secured their basic needs of food, shelter and medical care. My primary focus though was to be on their non-material well-being and on how their experiences of war, flight and exile affected their identities and ambitions. At an early stage, I learned that a major preoccupation of the young refugees was with the question ‘Who am I?’. This existential query is reflected in the narratives of the eight young men – with whom I have kept in touch over the past years – that are presented in War, Refuge and Self: Soldiers, Students and Artists in Kampala, Uganda (2006).

The young men who refused to live in refugee settlements (provided by the Government of Uganda, in close cooperation with the UNHCR, in remote rural areas) resided in Kampala illegally and were not entitled to any form of humanitarian assistance. The position from which I as a foreigner operated (visa in hand, research approved by UNCST, comfortable home, free to leave whenever

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I should wish to) could not have been in starker contrast with the situation of many of the refugees who, in addition to a constant stress about food and shelter, did not even have ID to prove who they were and thus lacked the minimum condition for being secure. Each day in Kampala reflected the disturbing injustices of the late 20th century. But although such injustices are patently obvious, the reasons behind them and the issues they raise are not.

UNRAVELLING PREOCCUPATIONS WITH POWER

‘Power’ is a much-discussed concept in social science. Yet I found that when it concerns the practice of research, a rather simplistic understanding of power prevails – one that I wish to challenge.

Traditionally anthropologists have gone out to study societies where, in the material sense of the word, the people they encounter are grosso modo less well off than they are themselves. In the late 1960s, anthropologists began to reflect on the implications of this situation for the relationship between researcher and researched. ‘Power’ became the keyword. Anthropologists from the West unilaterally considered themselves ‘powerful’ vis-à-vis the people they studied. This being powerful, they reasoned, entailed a responsibility: to ‘make heard’ the voices of those who lacked power, that is, their muted ‘research subjects’. Postcolonial scholars soon responded by characterising much of this work as reflecting the arrogance of white scholars purportedly ‘giving a voice’ to ‘Third World’ citizens while in fact appropriating these people’s voices for their own (scholarly) purposes. Feminist researchers examined their emancipatory projects and concluded that ‘making heard the voices of the marginalised’ or ‘seeing from below’ were indeed no self-evident strategies. The research subjects, it was ‘discovered’, have ‘a voice of their own’. The focus of the power discourse by self-aware anthropologists then shifted, it seems, from an emphasis on do-s to an emphasis on don’t-s: from the responsibility to use one’s power to admonitions about not to abuse it, that is, to not violate the authenticity and dignity of these ‘new’ voices.

Such admonitions make it sound as if ‘they’ – the ‘informants’ – are passive victims while ‘we’ – the anthropologists – have all the power for negotiation on our side. I do not believe this to be so. Ultimately, people decide what to tell, how to tell it, what to hide or when to be quiet. I ally with Nencel who, reflecting on her research among prostitutes in Lima, writes, ‘A good anthropologist always tries to protect the group participating in her project… However, because the research group is envisioned as vulnerable, it is often assumed they find it difficult to protect themselves, overlooking the fact that most vulnerable people are continuously protecting themselves and usually more experienced in this area than the anthropologist’ (Nencel 2001: 112). She concludes, ‘Why does the projection of power relations in the field reflect a nearly binary opposition between the powerful and the powerless instead of as in other areas departing from a notion of difference and the multipositioned subject?’ Power is not a zero-sum commodity and it is the confusing swinging between being powerful and powerless that I struggled with.
I lived in Kampala but never quite got to terms with its reality: I lived with my then partner in a comfortable house with a beautiful garden; we employed people to keep our house and guard the gate. The young men of my study were on their own – no house, no regular meals. I felt embarrassed. With hindsight, I dare say that the difference in living circumstances may have been more shocking for me than for them. I am not saying that they did not care. I am suggesting they were experienced, worn with this reality, whereas to me the constant confrontation with inequality and injustice was a deeply disturbing novelty.

Having grown up in the Netherlands also played its part: I wanted ‘equal relations’ all the time and with everybody, and tried to brush aside suggestions of me being different, or worse still, being the expert. I now realise this attitude made some people feel uncomfortable. Besides, part of my problem with being approached as ‘the expert’ or ‘the powerful one’, was that I felt I had to, and wished to, live up to those expectations. But instead it confronted me with my limitations. With my white skin I could get people past the gate and into the UNHCR premises, and if lucky to a desk, but was that actually any help? However much I wished I could do, I had no access to their files, nor could I influence their refugee status procedures or resettlement applications. It was not mere modesty that made me not want to be approached as the expert; I found it unbearable to be confronted with my own powerlessness in the face of so much hardship.

Yet many would assume that I – white educated woman from Europe – am powerful, not powerless. In my view, certain self-critical anthropologists inflate the notion of not wanting to abuse the power and privileges bestowed on them. They make too much of their potential influence, or even their possible exploitation. In the grand scheme of things, the way we carry out our fieldwork hardly makes a difference of life and death to the people we study. To us anthropologists that one experience may potentially change our lives. However, to most people we meet we are merely another passer-by, judged in terms of ‘is she helpful, funny, kind, does she keep her promises, does she make an effort to understand?’ This is not to say that one’s attitude does not matter. Treating people with respect and integrity is crucial: humiliation can stay with a person a lifetime (Essed 2006, Margalit 1996).

Lastly, is it true that anthropologists’ preoccupation with power relations is a consequence of the fact that they – and people in the West generally – still see ‘them’, their ‘research subjects’, in those terms: as powerless? There appears to be a conceptual difficulty causing people to equate the fact that people’s rights are being violated and their living conditions appalling with the perception of these people as helpless individuals. The trouble is that words like ‘poor’, ‘marginalised’ and ‘unempowered’ are used as if their meaning is self-evident. However, without the necessary qualifications, one ends up with reductionist ‘total images’ and those written about lose the quality of being human. Refugees are especially affected by this discourse of powerlessness and it is often overlooked that power springs from many sources: power that comes with wealth or status, physical power, the power of personality, intellectual power, the power (or ability) to have rewarding relationships with others, the powers of creativity. In discussions concerning fieldwork relationships it is usually only the power of wealth and status that is
taken into account. Perhaps it is for this reason that the issue of giving financial/material assistance to the people involved in one’s research has remained a rather contentious subject.

**GIVING ASSISTANCE**

I set off for Kampala with the notion that giving substantial material or financial assistance to my prospective ‘research subjects’ would not be done. The reason for this, I had learned, was twofold. Firstly, giving assistance or rendering services to one’s research subjects – through the methodological problem known as reactivity – will distort the research process, generate biased information and thus compromise one’s findings. Secondly, as Jacobsen & Landau write, ‘While reactivity problems occur in all field research, when informants are like refugees – marginalized, poor and powerless – the methodological problems fade into ethical ones’ (2003: 102). ‘Power’ and ‘ethics’ are the words that sum up the reasoning: it is un-ethical to give in a context defined by power differences, because giving further exacerbates these differences and, for one thing, may lure people into participating in a project that they may otherwise have preferred to stay away from.

Once in Uganda, I soon had a problem with the implications of the ‘no assistance’ dictum. The question of ‘giving’ – beyond that of giving small gifts to the people whose hospitality one accepts in the course of one’s fieldwork - is an inescapable dilemma of contemporary anthropological practice.

The destitute situation in which the majority of people included in my research found themselves, soon made me stick to two basic rules: I paid for people’s transport, and if possible combined our meetings with having a meal. After a few months, I began to take part in the advocacy activities that the Refugee Rights Research Project at Makerere University conducted in the absence of specialised legal services for refugees (e.g. providing copies of written cases to the Government and UNHCR, attending court sessions, accompanying people to UNHCR or the African Centre for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Victims of Torture (ACVT), ensuring legal guardianship for an unaccompanied Somali girl, writing referral letters to doctors, etc.). This engagement in hands-on advocacy work taught me a great deal about the strengths and potential flaws of politically engaged research and about the subject of my academic inquiries. Lining up at one office or another, or the endless wait for an audience with a protection officer, deepened my understanding of the despair, anger, humiliation, and resistance that are born from the interaction between refugees and these bureaucratic organisations. It also taught me how this interaction affects (re)negotiations of identity.

In addition to the advocacy work, I found myself providing for a variety of things: money for passport size pictures (constantly needed in the asylum bureaucracy); paying for people’s letters of recommendation, appeal, request and complaint to be typed and posted; money for photocopying and email services; money for blood tests, medicine, and hospital bills for acute malaria treatment and miscarriage; money for a month’s rent or a few nights in a secure hostel; and, money for food, for a blanket or stove, for paint and canvas, for transport to
refugee settlements. If giving this type of assistance has already raised a few people's eyebrows, I discovered the matter becomes more contentious when I mention that eventually I started supporting quite a few young refugees with school fees, and that several of the individuals supported through the Ijayo Foundation I set up when back in the Netherlands, are among the protagonists of my research. Many consider this to contradict principles of neutrality and the scientific ideal of objectivity. My question is: did anyone ever prove the opposite, that is, that people give 'neutral' answers – or even, speak 'the truth' – because there is no assistance involved? It seems quite likely to me that a person would purposefully give biased answers when there is no compensation involved – in whatever form – for knowledge, trust and time spent and shared. Many refugees are disappointed and frustrated with the empty promises of researchers and aid consultants, and more than once I heard, 'We have seen so many of them, it makes no difference, we tell them what they want to hear'. Before drawing any conclusions about the supposed relationship between assistance and bias, one should look a little deeper into the question at stake: that is, what are people's grounds and conditions for honest and open interaction and communication? I will return to this question below.

It did not take long before I decided that it was impossible to stick to the anthropological rule of 'no giving'. To me this was, first of all, a matter of ethics: is there a valid reason to say no when requests for material, financial or legal assistance come from people in life-threatening circumstances? Though this question invites and requires qualifications, my principle answer remains negative. What I encounter 'in the field' is a micro illustration of that enormous macro problem: the unacceptable patterns of inequality in the world in which we live. One may easily be overwhelmed and just leave it at that, simply because there are no ready-made answers and very little one can contribute. Moreover, some people argue they do not believe in charity. I support the opinion that situations of injustice require 'a rights-based humanitarianism' that goes beyond 'private charity or governmental largess' [and that] this approach is 'not about discretionary assistance when the mood for benevolence takes us… it is about defending, advocating and securing enjoyment of human rights' (Birch, quoted in Harrell-Bond 2002: 51). However, does this rule out charity? Even if charity would not help someone in the long-term, is that a reason to not give at all? I cannot do justice to this discussion within the scope of this article, yet believe it merits further debate among anthropologists who, by virtue of their profession, travel and see the world.

THE WHY’S AND HOW’S OF GIVING

As said, the assistance issue is usually framed in terms of its relevance to the research process and its outcome: giving distorts relationships in the field and results in biased (untruthful) information. Anthropologists want to work with people who feel free to talk and share their knowledge, opinions and perceptions. What makes for such a context? Its primary condition is an adequate level of trust, which I believe goes hand-in-hand with respect for the other person and his or her dignity. How trust and respect are obtained and expressed is context-dependent, but it
usually has something to do with dynamics of giving and receiving. It may entail being an attentive listener, disclosing intimacies about one’s own life, assisting a person to take her child to hospital, or to school, or simply sharing a meal. As researchers, we enter into relationships with others and cannot avoid these dynamics. My experiences in Kampala confirmed that, firstly, trust was indeed a precondition for open conversation, and secondly, that trust was only generated when I was prepared to enter into a personal relationship that involved sharing and giving. I recall one young man who had fled from Ethiopia referring to another researcher, saying, ‘He has never given me anything, he has never shown me he cares, so why shall I trust him?’ I fully acknowledge, and I believe this young man did too, that ‘giving’ can consist of being genuinely attentive and making time to listen to someone in dire circumstances, or in the case of my research, people traumatised by the experiences of war and flight (see also Schrijvers 1999). However, depending on one’s length of stay and the consequent depth of relationships, one will in some way or other become part of the economy of reciprocity. Ken Wilson (1992) argues that fieldworkers in Africa must realise that they cannot be social members of a community without some sort of economic engagement. Being prepared to give or contribute not only is a matter of personal ethics, but also is in keeping with the prevalent social rules. Therefore being prepared to give when this is expected or needed – instead of keeping one’s distance in the name of objectivity – will most likely contribute to the level of trust and as such positively contribute to the research process and its outcome.

The difficulties surrounding this issue are plenty. Firstly, considering the perspective of the person who gives, once you cross that threshold, thorny moments of decision follow. I found myself confronted with questions like: I can write to UNHCR on this man’s behalf, but should I not rather accompany him on his afternoon mission to see a protection officer… but really, I’m so busy, shall I tell him to look for someone else this time? And then back in Amsterdam: another email, what shall I reply, do I want to reply? Do I go to Western Union today, or do I have other priorities and shall I go tomorrow, or next week? It never ceases to feel uncomfortable that I can make these choices, and that they are always, to some extent, arbitrary. Most confusing is that the choices I make concern people of my age, whose histories and troubles I know, and some of whom I have come to know quite intimately.

In August 2000, together with the artist Petna Ndaliko Katondolo, I set up Yole!Africa, an art centre for young exiles and Ugandans. I was immediately pleased with the change of character of my activities: from ‘for’ and ‘on behalf of’ it became ‘with’; from rather negatively and hopelessly fighting a losing battle with bureaucracy (though necessary and instructive), it became taking part in something I believed in and sharing this vision with others. Clearly, the fact that a more unilateral form of giving can at times be genuinely unsettling, does not prove that giving in itself is wrong.

Secondly, conforming to a community’s social or ethical rules, implies taking on a specific role, which in turn determines specific ways of interaction. Paying for someone’s school fees may confer the title of ‘mother’ or ‘father’ – something, in my experience, many anthropologists find distinctly uncomfortable. On several
occasions I heard a researcher or legal adviser emphatically announce to a refugee who had just expressed his or her gratitude for the person’s help: ‘I am not your mother!’ It often seems that those of us who are anthropologists from the west, want to believe, and it is important to us, that we are either ‘inside’ or ‘outside’. Actions or conceptualisations that require crossing the boundary between these two too often or too unpredictably appear ultimately confusing. I too remember struggling to reconcile within myself the identities of researcher/ helper/ friend/ sister/ mother/ colleague/ outsider/ insider, etcetera. However, as much as we might like to determine our own roles and positions, this is not the anthropologist’s prerogative. Certain roles are irrevocably conferred on us: we do not arrive, even less so leave, as blank individuals. Relevant in this context is Wilson’s point that while giving things in most African societies establishes relations of status, this becomes a problem only ‘when the researcher, unlike members of the local population, has little experience in making something positive out of a patron-client relationship, and clings to an ideological ideal of equality’ (1992).

Thirdly, I believe that the most complex issue of this discussion does not concern the act of giving. I remember a conversation I had with someone about our disappointment with much of international development and about the controversies that loom so large when one sets out with the idea of ‘fixing’ other people’s problems. The person then said she had come to realise that it is nearly impossible to enter into, and especially maintain, an equal friendship with people one meets ‘over there’. I was on the alert, sensitive to her implicitly writing off the feelings of friendship for certain people in Kampala that I had come to treasure dearly. She then added, ‘It is not because giving is difficult, in fact it is easy to give. What is truly difficult is to be the one who must receive.’ It struck me in Kampala more clearly than it had before that it is indeed a hundred times easier to give than to receive. One paragraph in my field notes illustrates this. Samy, an aspiring artist and one of the protagonists of my study, was eighteen and had fled from Eastern Congo:

When we finally get to my house in Kibuli, Samy wants to rest and lies down on the bed in the garage [which he uses as his temporary studio], his paintings by his side. I leave him for a bit. Then prepare lunch. He’s still quiet. He says it’s not good to be a parasite. He feels he’s a parasite in everything. ‘It’s fine to be parasite to your parents, because you know they are your parents and one day when you grow old you will be their host. But with other people it makes you feel very bad.’

Marcel Mauss in his seminal *Essai sur le Don*, translated as *The Gift*, puts it categorically: ‘The gift not yet repaid debases the man who accepted it’ (1970 [1950]: 63). In other words, operating exclusively on the receiving end makes it near impossible to feel a human being among others. The philosopher Simone Weil writes: ‘Initiative and responsibility, to feel one is useful and even indispensable, are vital needs of the human soul’ (2002 [1949]: 15). Many of the young men in Kampala struggled with the fact that in their relationships with others they found themselves on the receiving end. That they had so little to give, made some of them pose the question ‘am I a person?’ This resonates with the African philosophical ‘moral conception of personhood’. The Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Gyekye
writes: ‘An individual can be a human being without being a person’, that is, ‘there are certain basic norms and ideals to which the behaviour of an individual, if he is a person, ought to conform’ (1997: 49-50). These basic norms and ideals include ‘kindness, generosity, compassion, benevolence, and respect and concern for others; in short, any action or behaviour conducive to the promotion of the well-being of others’ (1997: 50). While Gyekye stresses that ‘achieving economic success or status is one thing; achieving personhood is quite another’ (1997: 52), I believe that in the perception of several of the young refugees, those two were not so easily taken apart. Their worries about not studying, not having a job, or not being in a position to support a wife and children, which may ‘from the position of the wider community’ indeed be seen in terms of lacking social or economic success, may come to represent in their own eyes a much more general failing.7

Furthermore, in situations of severe stress, it is only exceptional personalities who have the mental space and the ability to remain aware of other people’s needs and translate the values of compassion and benevolence into concrete action. Yet, the majority for whom this is unfeasible, may still be burdened by a nudge feeling of incompetence and failure. Even if in Kampala the young refugees’ concerns and choices became more individually oriented, this is not to say that it did not tear at some deep-felt principles of social life. Interesting in this respect is Gyekye’s remark that ‘if a human being lives an isolated life, a life detached from the community, he would be described not as a person but as an individual. A life detached from the community would be associated with an egoistic life. An individual detached from the community would not be considered a responsible moral agent’ (1997: 50). Even though people may have the capacity to distinguish between different reasons for why certain individuals (come to) live outside a community, that does not mean that for the person involved, for his or her perception of self, this serves as sufficient apology. Furthermore, for the young men in Kampala, the issue of giving/receiving not only pertains to feelings of dignity, but also has relevance in terms of sheer survival: having nothing to give – whether money, food, skills, knowledge – means being in an extremely precarious situation. Without wanting to draw untenable parallels, Primo Levi’s insight is relevant here: ‘One of the most important things I had learned in Auschwitz was that one must avoid being a nobody. All roads are closed to a person who appears useless, all are open to a person who has a function, even the most fatuous’ (2002 [1963]: 235).

Lastly, in refugee situations researchers are not only confronted with those who need material or financial assistance, but also with individuals who, traumatised by what they have gone through, would benefit from some form of professional counselling or therapy. These services are usually acutely lacking, and some researchers come to fulfil the role of listener, adviser or counsellor. Giving emotional and psychological support in such circumstances is a very delicate process and clearly should not be the sole responsibility of untrained individuals. The issues this throws up merit a separate article, which, if I were to write it, I would start with a quote from Arthur Japin’s historical novel The Two Hearts of Kwasi Boachi (2001: 183). In 1837, the ten-year-old Ashanti prince Kwasi Boachi and his cousin arrive at the court of King Willem I. They are given to the Dutch
by the Ashantene, as surety in a deal over illegal slave trading. Though the boys need not worry about livelihood or education, guaranteed by the Dutch state, as obvious strangers they are faced with experiences common to many of today’s refugees. They treasure memories of home, but suppress these too, for the break with the past is too painful. They are looked upon with a mixture of curiosity, condescension and contempt. Kwasi has one confidante, the young princess Sophie. She is not only witty and charming, but also insatiably inquisitive about Kwasi’s culture and empathises with his outsider’s position. (Might she have been born in a different time and social circle, we would have seen in her a budding anthropologist!) However, when Kwasi finds himself in hospital – his ‘difference’ has provoked a vicious attack on him by his classmates – he does not want the young princess to visit him. In his memoirs, he reflects:

‘I awoke bathed in perspiration. The idea that she should share my pain was unbearable. Pity is more painful than a beating, for it wounds two people. However well-intentioned, a show of compassion can have the effect of patting a bruise. You become aware of injuries you didn’t know you had sustained.’

CONCLUSION

If the act of receiving is so challenging, then what needs critical reflection is the issue of how to give. The trials of being on the receiving end are often aggravated by the attitude of the supposed ‘helpers’. Everyone can faultlessly sense the attitude of his or her ‘helper’, and both extremes – ‘you are undeserving’ and ‘you poor thing’ – are equally disturbing. Harrell-Bond explores this issue in her article The experience of refugees as recipients of aid (1999), and she asks: is it possible that the way refugees are ‘helped’ (including the role they are forced to assume to get assistance) is one source of debilitating stress for those who are in a position where they have no alternative but to receive? Of course, all human beings are dependent on others to a greater or lesser extent and thus the issue is not being ‘helped’ per se, but the relative powerlessness of the recipient vis-à-vis the helper. Required is a responsible, carefully weighed way of giving, which minimally asks for an awareness of what was touched upon above, that is, that there are multiple sources and manifestations of power and powerlessness.

In conclusion, I wish to stress that the subject of ‘giving’ is obviously a huge one, invoking both methodological and ethical questions that should include discussion on the politics of knowledge (see also Lammers 2006a and 2006b). I do not write about it because I feel near to solving them, but instead because I have struggled with these issues, and continue to do so. In Kampala, I followed my intuition, tried to think critically, observe closely, and to welcome advice that people volunteered. Back within the walls of academia, I strongly feel this is a subject that merits anthropologists’ open and honest reflection.
References


Notes

1 For some time now this has been changing, with anthropologists working closer to home both in the South and in Europe.


3 This has not always been the case. See in Harrell-Bond 1999: ‘When refugees were still people’.

4 This project was part of the EU-funded research on policy issues in refugee health care in Sub-Saharan Africa, with Barbara Harrell-Bond as principal investigator; see Verdirame & Harrell-Bond 2005.

5 Several authors have described a similar experience: Karam 1998, Schepers-Hughes 1995, Schrijvers 1995.


7 A friend in Kampala expressed his low opinion about the behaviour of some of his fellow refugees from Congo, by saying: ‘They seem to have forgotten that if someone helps you to wash your back, you yourself must wash your front’. The proverb Gyekye uses to illustrate that the notion of individuality exists in African social thought, also focus on the notion of individual responsibility, stressing that no ‘helper’ can completely take over the personal burdens that necessarily come with the ‘continuous drama of struggles’ that human life is (1997: 41).

8 Relevant too is the issue commonly referred to as ‘exit strategies’. Behar expresses this dramatically: ‘We anthropologists… leave behind our own trail of longings, desires and unfulfilled expectations in those upon whom we descend. About that vulnerability we are still barely able to speak’ (1996: 24-25).