

FIELD RESEARCH IN DIFFICULT CONTEXTS  
HOSTILE SETTINGS, SENSITIVE TOPICS, TABOOS  
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Today, most of social sciences requiring field research are particularly sensitive to epistemological and ethical problems arising from research in difficult contexts. This is not a new concern. The topic has already been explored (Bouillon, Frésia & Tallio, 2006; Sriram, King, Merus, Martin-Ortega & Herman, 2009). Nevertheless, much remains to say about the various consequences of these difficulties on fieldwork method: on the insecurity of the researcher and the protection of informants when operating in dangerous settings, on the ethical challenges surrounding research with vulnerable populations, or on the validity of information gathered in violent contexts. Reasons for that are difficult to trace. They may be due to the disparity of hostile settings, to the normative pluralism of concerned institutions, to the disjunction of experienced temporalities by different actors, to the heterogeneity of data available, or to all these reasons altogether. With this special issue, we wish to confront researchers' personal reflections on their own field experience about the challenges of conducting qualitative research in 'difficult contexts', on sensitive or forbidden topics, in hostile post-conflict or pre-conflict settings, or with vulnerable populations in situation of emergency or natural disaster, etc. Contributions for the following issues are welcome:

**Access to research subjects on the field.** This difficulty is common to all types of difficult contexts. Access to the field itself, but also access to research subjects or vulnerable people in post-conflict settings or natural disasters and finally, access to valuable information. Some settings are subjected to such military or police controls that access to the social spaces where potential informants are is hardly possible. In these situations some actors may be in the margins of law, while others may be clandestine. Then, how can the researcher conduct participant observation in social settings stressed by political violence? How can the researcher build trust and confidence with informants and authorities in such situations? The personal answers to these questions have a strong effect on the feasibility and the practicalities of fieldwork.

**Sensitive topics, taboos.** A setting may be difficult, not because of access but because of moral taboo or political sensitivity of research topic. Social taboos (like rape, suffering, abortion, power abuses), and sensitive topics (like the subjects' victimization in sorcery or ordinary violence or the involvement of repellent groups in war crimes or genocides) call for research practices and methods exploring the margin of traditional research models.

**The off-site survey's epistemological shortcomings.** The researchers' difficulties to return back to fieldworks classified 'dangerous' and the increased financial cost of fieldwork missions collude with the possibilities offered by the new communication technologies to promote off-site surveys. Indeed, off-site survey or on-line ethno surveys seem to be a good alternative to solve a range of expected problems raised by access to difficult fieldwork settings. But, on-line surveys go very far beyond traditional qualitative research methods and therefore address several epistemological and ethical issues. Between subjective perspectives and unverifiable misleading statements, what is the veracity value of information collected at distance, by phone, mail or web? Or, through the virtual communities of social networking? Such a methodological development doubtlessly presents new challenges and interesting opportunities, but its impacts on the ethics of knowledge production in difficult contexts need an in-depth reflection.

**The issue of security.** Conducting field research in difficult or hostile settings raises practical, social and ethical problems that have direct methodological impacts on fieldwork. This is especially true of the 'neither peace nor war' contexts that are more and more frequent in the South. Among the many ethical issues at stakes is the crucial one of the protection of the informant and the researcher himself or herself. How therefore to avoid overemphasizing or underemphasizing the security impact of research in the daily life of respondents? The efforts to guard against risk of threat to personal security meet ethical issues difficult to address.

**The issue of objectivity and reliability of information.** Survey, either conducted in dangerous or hostile setting or off-site, involves several issues concerning the objectivity and validity of information. What we would like to do in this special issue is to reflect on the conditions of scientific objectification that derives from the necessary methodological 'bricolages' undertaken. Indeed, research in difficult settings is conducive not only to multiple subjectivities' expression but also to intentionally oriented discourses. In these conditions, how can ethnography organize and give meaning to contested realities, when the contexts under study are marginal, conflicting, loaded with strong ideological and political stakes, and when researchers must compose - and sometimes compete - with many other stakeholders (local NGOs, international agencies, social workers or reporters)? When research explores situations of suffering, emotions that arise are to be taken seriously, since they generate a feeling of unease or illegitimacy, that the researcher cannot help feeling, being healthy and safe in such times of misfortune. How to then tackle this ineluctable malaise, when exploring the situations of victims of a violent physical assault or of refugees who had just fled a natural disaster or a war zone?

This call for papers is open to all social sciences rooted in empirical approaches to fieldwork. The expected papers will position critically on methodological and ethical issues that arise from doing research in difficult, unstable, violent or dangerous settings in whatever part of the world.

***Propositions of articles in English or French (title + abstract of no more than 400 words) should be sent before 4 May 2014 to the editorial board of the journal ([civilisations@ulb.ac.be](mailto:civilisations@ulb.ac.be) and [natacha.belang@ulb.ac.be](mailto:natacha.belang@ulb.ac.be)), and to the guest editors of the issue, Jacky Bouju ([bouju@msh.univ-aix.fr](mailto:bouju@msh.univ-aix.fr)) and Pierre Petit ([pipetit@ulb.ac.be](mailto:pipetit@ulb.ac.be)).***

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