

FIELDWORK IN VIOLENT AND DANGEROUS PLACES

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Introduction

Unfortunately, there is no one-size-fits-all recipe for safe, ethical, and successful fieldwork, nor can we prepare for all eventualities when conducting fieldwork in dangerous places. While all types of research, fieldwork based or not, confront us with questions of ethics or risks in one way or another, working in violent contexts throws them into much sharper relief. Research in violent and dangerous places is complicated and the accompanying fieldwork often involves confusion, failures, and mistakes, while demanding creativity, flexibility, and reflexivity on the part of researchers. There are several tough questions we should ask ourselves before, during, and after fieldwork in violent and politically volatile places. In this lecture, I will speak as honestly as possible about how I have grappled with the practical and ethical challenges of conducting fieldwork in insecure environments such as Liberia and Sierra Leone during the Mano River Basin crisis, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Mali, and Niger. I will address issues concerning the personal safety of researchers and respondents in the field—including informant anonymity, the positionality of the researcher, and how we can design and generate fieldwork research methods that ensure safety for researchers as well as respondents without

compromising data quality and ethical standards. I will comment on the current Covid-19 pandemic because it is changing and impacting research environments in Africa. The pandemic may halt a lot of planned fieldwork for quite some time, making international researchers more dependent on African counterparts. It could also mean much less access to research funds for African colleagues, as it is often the case that money for research and particularly for fieldwork comes from and is controlled by researchers from the Global North.

This is not another discussion about the technical specificities of certain research methods or whether the objectives of research are best reached through a qualitative or quantitative approach. Rather, my focus in this lecture is on the messy realities of fieldwork in violent places. It is simply not possible to present a recipe for safe, ethical, and successful fieldwork, but we can learn from others' experiences and particularly from the mistakes we make. This is therefore an attempt to reflect on some of the mistakes I have made during fieldwork and to define some of the dilemmas of fieldwork in violent places—dilemmas that we can prepare to face, but that, irrespective of what some ethics research boards seem to believe, we cannot simply resolve once and for all. This means that while I will spend some time on the dos and don'ts, I will mostly focus on the question marks, as this is where the most difficult challenges lie, although it is not always easy to be aware of where the dilemmas are located.

Drawing On My Own Experiences

I will draw quite heavily on my own personal experience as a researcher that came of age, so to speak, while working in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Côte d'Ivoire during the Mano River Basin crisis, which took place from the late 1990s to the early 2000s. At the turn of the century, I also started to work in Northern Uganda, where I was present both during the peak and the aftermath of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebellion (particularly between 2005 and 2007). Both intellectually and emotionally, this was quite different from the work I did during the Mano River Basin crisis.

In the Mano River Basin, I mostly worked on my own, maybe with a local field assistant, or partly in collaboration with a few other young researchers. On the contrary, much of the fieldwork I was involved in during my time in Northern Uganda consisted of large-scale mixed-methods operations funded by international organizations like the United Nations Development

Programme (UNDP) and involved as many as sixty to seventy field assistants, all of them young Ugandan students or recent graduates in need of paid work. As I was responsible for preparing these studies and the subsequent implementation of data gathering, analyses, and publication together with a colleague, it also meant that I was responsible for the safety of about seventy people.

It went well, everybody returned from the fieldwork in the war-affected Acholi regions of Uganda safely, and we produced reports that I believe had an impact on the humanitarian response; for instance, our 2005 report represented the first systematic assessment of the living conditions in the region's camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs). However, in hindsight, I also recognized that it was not only due to our ability to plan well, implement these plans, and deal effectively with dangerous situations as they emerged; we were also just lucky at times. You need to have good fortune on your side when you do this kind of work. I still think it was worth it, but my experiences from Northern Uganda are a much-needed rejoinder that while planning, proper, and flexible implementation of fieldwork plans are essential, in a violent or conflict-affected setting, you cannot rule out the possibility that things may nonetheless end badly. The question then is whether such work is really worth the risk, and this is a question everybody who wants to engage in this kind of research must find their own answer to.

Toward the end of my most intense period of work in Northern Uganda (around 2007), I also initiated research in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and there I found myself faced with many of the same challenges and dilemmas as those I had encountered in Northern Uganda. While Northern Uganda had obviously taught me a lesson or two about the dos, the don'ts, and the gray areas in between, in hindsight, it was also probably true that our ability to pull off large fieldwork operations during one of the peak periods in the LRA rebellion had made us think that we were "masters" of fieldwork-based research in conflict-affected areas. North Kivu in Eastern DRC almost proved me wrong in this regard. Driving out of Goma toward the Ugandan border during a major rebel offensive was not necessarily the best idea, but I felt that I could not abandon the two Ugandan drivers we had hired and their cars either. We should never have taken them along, but there we were. The Rwandan border officials would not let us cross the border, and I had to get the drivers as well as the cars back to Uganda—if not, they would at minimum have lost their jobs if they returned without the cars. In the end, we drove and got out, and while it was

not necessarily pretty, I did not leave anybody behind. If there is a lesson here, apart from the need to plan better and not to take the easy way out—which in this case I did, as it seemed easier to hire the cars in Uganda and drive across the border to North Kivu—it is that you are responsible for all team members, local hired hands and drivers included, if your planning does not work out.

In the same period, my research drifted back to West Africa, namely Liberia, and since 2008 increasingly to the Sahel, mainly but not exclusively Mali and Niger. While I will return to my Sahel experiences later in this lecture, here I would just like to note that while questions concerning trust and risk are a constant part of the daily negotiation of fieldwork-based conflict and intervention research that I had grappled with in earlier research in insecure places, they have never felt as acute as when I started working in Mali and the Sahel in 2008. The reasons for this lie in the deep uncertainties and fears that are brought about by a combination of insecurity and the near impossibility of accessing the most research-relevant parts of these territories. While the research situation was also highly insecure at times in the other conflict-affected zones I worked in, my research teams and I were rarely, if ever, the direct target of attacks. This is different in the West African Sahel, where jihadist insurgents attack hotels to create spectacular dramas for international media coverage. Such conditions of insecurity also mean that international hostages are highly sought after, leading to a severe decrease of fieldwork-based research in these areas.

Following the foregoing elaborations, I will now address issues concerning the personal safety of researchers and respondents in the field—including informant anonymity, the positionality of the researcher, and how we can design and generate fieldwork research methods that ensure safety for researchers as well as respondents without compromising data quality and ethical standards. This is certainly not easy, but it is also important to conduct this type of research in as ethical a manner as possible. This will come in the form of three main entries: managing risks and research ethics; navigating risks and access; and doing no harm.

Managing Risks and Research Ethics

The dilemmas emerging from trying to manage risks and research ethics are often a result of our grappling with questions concerning control, confusion, and failure in the research process. Most often than not, this

is a consequence of the tension between the ideal of control in and over fieldwork and actual confusion in the research process, a tension that most fieldwork-based researchers will have experienced at one point or another.

“Control” is the normal portrayal of the research process by the field researcher. With a few noticeable exceptions, we find narratives of control in most guidebooks on field research and fieldwork-based research methods and in the grant proposals researchers write to convince funders to finance their research. It is no wonder then that many first-time researchers experience confusion, if not feelings of outright personal failure, when their expectations and (self-)narratives of control over the research process are confronted by the messy reality of fieldwork-based research.

While this reality check does not only concern research in violent and conflict-affected contexts, it is in these contexts in particular, with their tense social dynamics, that the perception and reality of loss of control over the research process can be particularly profound—and potentially dangerous for the researcher and those they interact with, such as assistants, informants, and participants.

Feelings of alienation and fearing for one’s personal safety in the field are very normal and happen to everyone. However, managing risk means more than the safety of the researcher—who often can return to a more peaceful homestead. It must also include managing the risk of all research participants, including local researchers, assistants, brokers, and informants. Very often these local partners do not have the opportunity to leave if they start receiving unwanted attention from state security agencies or violent nonstate actors. This also strongly highlights the need to pay particular attention and be sensitive to the material, information, and data received in the field. It is not necessarily ethically correct to use all information retrieved. The researcher could be told things that could incriminate someone or put them in serious danger. If there is a chance that respondents/informants are told things that may later put them in harm’s way, such information should not be used.

This is particularly important in violent or conflict-affected places, and especially when you are dealing with potentially vulnerable groups. Equally important, irrespective of what we may think about our informants, we are researchers. Our task is to understand—to produce knowledge—not to act as detectives or investigating journalists. These are “hats” that should

not be shared or used in an interchangeable manner. As researchers, we should stick to our role and the credo of informant anonymity in our line of work. We have a responsibility to protect our informants when they tell us something that could put them in danger.

The responsibility to protect may seem quite straightforward, but in practice it is more complicated, as it inevitably also involves some questions concerning who we are in the field. We are researchers, but most of us are more than that. We are not machines but humans, and as humans, we crave respect and friendship and are affected by what we see around us and by the stories we hear in violent and closed contexts. It would be sad if this were not the case, as this could mean that we do fieldwork for our own careers only. Caring is a good thing, but how we care and show that care also has wider implications.

As researchers, our first and foremost role is to document, analyze, and enable understanding. We are not journalists, nongovernmental organization (NGO) workers, or social activists, and we are certainly not criminal investigators. At the same time, the push for research impact in many countries as well as our own political convictions and agendas may prompt us to see ourselves as more than researchers. Wanting to help is thankfully a common urge, especially when working with vulnerable groups and marginalized populations. However, we should be extremely careful not to make promises we cannot keep and always ask ourselves what responsible empathy can look like short of acting as a social worker.

Establishing friendship during fieldwork is possible but will often involve highly uneven relationships, and there are good reasons to remind ourselves what our main role is. This also means that we as researchers and academics have a responsibility to avoid sensationalism and victimization of our complex subjects who have agency—both in what we ask our research participants and how we represent them in our research outputs.

How we deal with the different roles discussed above also has significance for how well we can negotiate our positionality and identity in the field. We are often misrepresented and misunderstood in the field. Most often, although not always, this is due to how accurately we present ourselves and how well we are able to read the local context.

We are outsiders; we do not belong here (sites of fieldwork), and we should

not pretend that we do. If we are doing anything else other than interviewing expatriates, representatives of various interventions, and local elites, it should quickly become clear to us that our background and who we are make us different, or to stand out in sites of fieldwork. We should also be aware that it is always easy for local people to comprehend what we are doing in what literally may be their own garden or backyard. Particularly in areas of large-scale international intervention, it is very understandable that even if we may claim the opposite, people will think that we and the international intervention programs are in some way related.

We are who we are, and we should be honest about it. Taking advantage of local misrepresentations of who we are in order to gain access to something or somebody that we otherwise would not have had access to is generally not a good idea. Such maneuvers are not only ethically wrong, but also have a tendency of coming back to us in unpredictable and unwanted ways, leaving us in a nest of lies and compromises with our real identity that in the end may bring danger both to the researcher and those around the researcher (e.g., local assistants, interpreters, etc.).

Navigating Risk and Access

Researching conflicts as they unfold is challenging and usually necessitates reliance on local contacts, researchers, and fixers. As a member of the community of globally mobile conflict researchers—those who mostly live in Europe or North America—I depend a lot on these locally based people. This is particularly true for my research in the Sahel, where independent access to conflict-affected areas has become almost impossible due to high levels of insecurity. This turns the question of trust in local brokers into an essential one that relates not only to academic careers but also to personal security. In a highly insecure context, who can we trust regarding the collection of, and access to, data and information? Who can we trust for sound security advice? How does money influence our research relationships?

These questions are a constant part of the daily negotiation of fieldwork-based conflict and intervention research, and I also grappled with them in earlier research in insecure places, such as the Mano River Basin, Northern Uganda, and the DRC. However, they have never felt as acute as when I started working in Mali and the Sahel in 2007. The reasons for this lie in the deep uncertainties and fears that are brought about by a combination of insecurity and the near impossibility of accessing the most research-

relevant parts of these territories. While the research situation was also highly insecure at times in the other conflict zones I worked in, my research teams and I were never the direct target of attacks. This is different in the Sahel, where jihadist insurgencies attack hotels to create spectacular dramas for international media coverage, and international hostages are highly sought after, leading to a severe decrease of fieldwork-based research in these areas. This situation is concerning because we are in danger of losing a grounded understanding of the social landscape of these areas based on independent third-party empirical observations in the field. Some of the security concerns causing this retreat from the field are very real, while others are motivated by risk-averse universities, organizations, and funders. While we can possibly do something about the institutional risk averseness, conducting research in high-risk contexts is something we need to become better at dealing with.

In the Sahel, the research that does take place is often conducted under a certain degree of uncertainty and suspicion, if not outright paranoia. Field visits are infrequent and usually short, making the development of a systematic dataset based on firsthand data collection nearly impossible. This leads to a dependence on a combination of more anecdotal evidence and, increasingly, data collected by sources such as journalists or intelligence officers whose reliability is uncertain—not because these data are bad or biased, but because we often can vouch for neither their quality nor the original purpose for which they were collected, analyzed, and framed in a certain way. Parts of this problem can be tackled by triangulating as much data as possible. The other strategy often employed by researchers based in the Global North is working with a local partner, be it an individual researcher or a research organization, who will do the data collection in risky areas, while the international researcher remains in the capital or another relatively safe part of the country, if not attempting to control the research process entirely remotely from home.

In an ideal world, relationships between foreign researchers and local assistants would be based on trust, respect, and eventual friendship, turning the researcher into what Geertz calls the “myth of the chameleon fieldworker, perfectly tuned to his exotic surroundings, a walking miracle of empathy, tact, patience and cosmopolitanism.”² My own experience suggests, however, that while relationships with local assistants, researchers, fixers, and brokers may eventually evolve into trustful friendship, relationships that work over an extended period mainly function not in spite of, but due to

their unequal or asymmetrical nature.

We live in a highly uneven world, and money matters. Most often it is the researchers from the Global North who bring funding opportunities, control the research process, and spend a considerable amount of a project's resources. Unless one works with well-off interventions or other elites, this obviously has an impact on research relationships in the field. Thus, while friendship may evolve, this unevenness has an impact on the relationship.

This also means that when money is involved, as it almost always is, concrete contracts should be established up front. Clearly discussing obligations, tasks, deadlines, and payment amounts and schedules with all parties may help avoid mistrust and establish good working relationships. Starting a relationship in such a business-like manner may seem difficult, but leaving things hanging can create uneven expectations that may undermine the collaboration. Issues such as the possible coproduction of research in the form of joint articles, reports, or op-eds can be treated in a similar contractual manner and should also involve the question of whether they are potentially harmful for local researchers. In all cases, researchers need to carefully consider the power they may represent to others in terms of access to money, publications, and jobs or simply as an access point to the outside world, as this perception of power may make people take risks they would otherwise avoid.

My argument is that this general trend is even more salient in highly insecure places, where the international community tends to live in garrisons to which local researchers rarely have the same privileged access as researchers from the Global North. There is undoubtedly an element of fear in intervention-related research in highly insecure places. Working in a place where I am a potential target has caused me at times to have second thoughts concerning the loyalty of those I work with and to have concerns about their security advice. Are they making the right decisions, and to what degree is the fact that I am here influencing these decisions? Are they willing to take more risks than they would otherwise? Are they setting up risky meetings only in order to serve my research agenda?

These are issues, questions, and doubts that I probably should have thought through critically much earlier. I wonder whether the reason for this is that we—that is, researchers like me who have made fieldwork-based conflict research their career and livelihood—have created a social environment

where we hardly ever talk about fear, distrust, wrongdoings, and paranoia. Do we collectively cultivate an image of being able to get things done against the odds, in which we become the “heroes” of our own stories with no room for doubt and fear? I know that I have been guilty of this in my branding of myself and my “field adventures.” This lecture is therefore also an attempt to more strongly acknowledge the relationships with those who have helped build my career: the local researchers, fixers, and brokers.

Let us for a moment consider a place like Tillabéri in Niger Republic. It is part of the triborder zone between Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, but it is not actually a peripheral region, as it is located a mere 50 kilometers from the capital of Niamey. Still, it has quickly become so violent and dangerous that it is exceedingly difficult to access. This means that what is happening here has been almost an enigma. What is the role of the insurgency by the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)? How do people cope with the new violent social landscape they find themselves facing? What has happened to transhumance? These are just some of the basic questions a researcher like me is almost desperate to find the data to answer. This also entails a situation in which it is easy to start compromising on the delicate balance between navigating risks and access. This is particularly the case if the very design of the research project involves local researchers. Getting access to data that few others have access to is of course extremely tempting, and as ambition kicks in, it is easy to start compromising. One might start to think, even if I cannot go—or do not dare to go, which often may be more correct—they (i.e., local researchers) can go and harvest these data for the benefit of the research. This is a dilemma that one will often confront, and it is easy to minimize the risk side of things to get the access that we desperately want.

The current Covid-19 situation has brought this dilemma even more to the fore. Northern researchers are now depending even more on local researchers for conducting fieldwork. There may of course be an element of local empowerment in this as the dependency starts going both ways, but as the economic effects of Covid-19 start to bite harder in poorer countries, the little that may have existed of local funding for research may dry up entirely, leaving local researchers even more dependent on the funding from their colleagues of the Global North. If this becomes the case, the question is whether they will say no to potentially dangerous suggestions, as doing so could entail the end of the relationship. At the very least, there is a possibility that this could be the case.

Do No Harm—Easy to Say, Difficult to Adhere to

Most of us clearly do not want to do harm, but as the example that follows will underline, it is much easier to say this than to adhere to it. There are several reasons for this. An important one is that we prefer not to talk about the confusion, fears, and isolation that we encounter during fieldwork. When the study is done, we quickly dismantle the scaffolding, leaving behind only the polished, published article or book, leading students and younger colleagues to think that their senior peers always succeed in the field. This is far from the case, as the very logic of fieldwork means that we make mistakes, but we prefer to be the heroes of our own stories. It is exceedingly rare that we—the better-established researchers—talk about our own confusion, fears, and sense of alienation in the field.

Here is an anecdote from my side that shows not only confusion and fear, but also that abiding by the maxim of “do no harm” may easily be brushed aside by interests and ambitions. I have always taken pride in a rule I used while working in the Mano River Basin, the DRC, and Northern Uganda: that nobody working with me should be allowed to take risks that I was not prepared to take. This meant that if I did not feel comfortable traveling to a certain place or meeting somebody, then no one else should. In fact, I have even written about this and about the danger that the access to funding that people like me represent may lead local researchers and research assistants to take higher risks than they normally would. It is a seemingly easy rule but not necessarily one I have always abided by. The increased difficulties in accessing the field that I encountered in Mali after 2012 almost inevitably led me to start making some compromises in this regard. As researchers, we want as much accurate data as possible and to be the ones with the most interesting and novel pieces of information. Thus, the temptation will always be to try to push through, thinking, “hey ho, let’s go!” This is precisely what I did one night.

I should confess that I find insurgents like Mokhtar Belmokhtar fascinating.³ I am not just fascinated by his role as the man behind the attack against the In Amenas gas plant in Algeria in 2013 that made him the most famous and most wanted jihadi in the Sahel, but also by his full life trajectory. As a young man in the 1980s, he left Algeria to fight in Afghanistan, then returned and played a role in the Algerian Civil War in the 1990s, followed by his time as a bandit, smuggler, and insurgent roaming Northern Mali and other Sahel peripheries, until he cast all his criminal networks aside and became what

he is today: the mythical face of Sahel jihadism. Thus, when one morning during a discussion about which informants to interview in the coming week and where, one trusted broker told me that it could be possible to meet a recently returned fighter who had spent some time with Belmokhtar's insurgency, Al-Mourabitoun. I was thrilled. I told him that if it was possible to set up such a meeting, he should go ahead. He said he would try. A few days later I was told that this former fighter was willing to meet us at a place on the edge of Bamako. The broker who had provided this contact and I talked this through—just the two of us, as I felt that involving others could jeopardize this opportunity or even bring it to the attention of security forces, and then the whole encounter could turn very bad. We talked for a while, debating pros and cons. Was it real? Would it be possible? Would this person show up? Could we verify what he would tell us? We also discussed our own security, and I asked my broker if he felt secure and comfortable going through with this meeting. He said it was fine, that it would not be a problem.

Thus, in the evening of that very day, we prepared to leave. It was just the two of us and a driver who only knew where he was supposed to take us but nothing more. As we started to approach the meeting point at the edge of town, it was dark, and few people were to be seen. I could sense tension starting to build up in the car but chose to ignore it. We drove through some dark buildings and entered what seemed like a small abandoned yard between three old, shattered houses. We parked the car but left the lights on and the engine running. My broker started to get restless; he became even more nervous when not one but four persons emerged from the shadows, telling us to stop the engine and turn off the lights. It was abundantly clear that we were in a place where we should not have been. The person we were supposed to meet was not alone. He was together with three other men. Were they friends, former fighters, or something else? We never really understood, but they were aggressive and angry and demanded money. What I had hoped would be an interesting event that would provide novel insights into the inner life of Al-Mourabitoun ended up in an attempt to navigate ourselves out of this encounter as best we could. After lengthy exchanges that seemed like negotiations, we finally agreed to give two of them a lift to another destination on the outer boundaries of Bamako. When we got there, they just left the car and disappeared into the shadows of the darkness. We never understood what this was about and never talked much about this thereafter—both of us seemingly happy to brush this aside as just a bad day in the field.

It was only much later that I started to reflect on this event and came to understand that this was not just the case of a broker making a bad decision but, rather, was very much about me. Those who I worked with knew what I was interested in, and on this occasion, this knowledge pushed one of them to do something that he clearly otherwise would not have done. I should have seen this. I should have recognized that what drove this decision was an unequal relationship based on the power that I held by controlling funding and representing global connections through copublishing and other things of interest to a young aspiring researcher like him. I had misunderstood the situation, not realizing that, in his attempt to please me and grow closer to me and the global connections that I represented, my broker had ended up doing something that he would never have done had it not been for me.

Field research is always about money or capital of some sort. Without money we cannot travel, secure accommodation, or hire local researchers. There must be something in it for the local partners. This should be obvious, but it is often the elephant in the room of field research, hardly ever mentioned in books or articles based on field research or in manuals intended to prepare students and young researchers for the field. We prefer not to talk about it, as it would throw into sharp relief the obvious power hierarchies that exist between international and local researchers. Money has serious implications for research relationships. Local researchers in violent and closed contexts desperately need funding for research and for their salaries, and this may very well affect what they are willing to do and the risks they are willing to take. There is no perfect antidote to this problem in this type of setting. The only thing we can do is to become better at talking honestly about it.

Concluding Remarks

The discussion of fieldwork-based research dilemmas that this lecture has grappled with also links to a broader emergent debate on researcher failure. Perceptions of failure in research are not the exception but the rule. In general, however, failure—once the basis of positivist research in the form of Popper’s falsification that leads to progress in science—seems to have been pushed into the shadows of private conversations among friends or close colleagues. The propensity to acknowledge (or not) failures in the research process has less to do with the general approach a researcher is taking, although certain approaches may be more prone to embrace failures as those moments of surprise or “creative ruptures” which spark research in the first place. Rather, the silencing of failures and dilemmas in

research is a bigger problem that has to do with research as a career and academia as a competitive marketplace, in which individuals compete for positions, promotions, and research funding. Normalizing supposed failure in academia would go a long way in addressing some of the dilemmas around control and confusion in fieldwork—as it would reveal that what is deemed failure is the effect of a sanitized and formalized understanding of what social science research entails.

Researchers are humans, and as humans we all make mistakes. Everybody has feelings, including the fear of uncertainties, and distrust during fieldwork, and this should be acknowledged as normal. We are certainly not machines, but people with emotions and attachments. The real problem is the silence around these dilemmas. This lecture has been an attempt to break this silence. While we cannot resolve all the ethical dilemmas of fieldwork in violent places, we can become much better at talking openly about them, and thereby create a reflective and open atmosphere for ongoing discussions about these questions. This is most likely the only cure that exists. While it is not one that will help us overcome these issues, it will make it easier for us to understand them and treat them as ethically and sensitively as possible.

Fieldwork is never easy, and it is also at times ethically problematic. However, in a world of fragmentation, polarization, fake news, and biased reporting, this type of independent third-party analysis is very much needed. It can alter wrong impressions, it can facilitate understanding, correct misplaced policies and interventions, and it can give voice to people who otherwise would not be heard. Moreover, it can be of great use for those we work with. The world is certainly not a fair place, and our various relationships with participants and colleagues in the field reflect this. However, this does not mean that we cannot make these relationships work better if we acknowledge our different positions and how they can jointly be used to mutual benefit. Such benefits will not make us equal, nor will they necessarily be equally divided, but it will make working with research partners and participants in the places where we conduct our fieldwork less exploitative and more equitable.

NOTES

1. This lecture draws upon and is inspired by Berit Bliesmann De Guevara and Morten Bøås (eds.), *Doing Fieldwork in Areas of International Intervention: A Guide to Research in Violent and Closed Contexts* (Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press, 2020). It was a conversation between myself and Berit over a nice dinner and some good wine in a small restaurant in Scilly, England, at the end of a conference that initiated both this edited collection and my attempt to revisit my own fieldwork experiences, including not only the successes, but also the failures and my wrongdoings in the field.
2. Clifford Geertz, ed., *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 56.
3. On Mokhtar Belmokhtar and the conflict in Mali, see, for example, Morten Bøås, "Crime, Coping, and Resistance in the Mali-Sahel Periphery," *African Security* 8, no. 4 (2015), 299–319.

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