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Research in "red areas" – voice for the voiceless or the patron-client relationship?

The contribution analyses the role of research brokers in social sciences' research in Africa. With an increasing number of places which are not accessible for Western researchers because of the security concerns, the role of brokers in research is becoming essential. Moreover, their voice in the research is usually the one which is heard the most strongly. However, there is a growing ethical dilemma about their input to the research. Among the questions which arise with this type of research may be brokers' and interlocutors' security, confidentiality, and reliability; their position as co-authors even though they did not write a single world; or their possible dependence on researchers' sources which may establish another patron-client relationship and bias for the research as a whole. Thus, there is a huge question of objectivity of the data collected by them and, in general, of their contribution as co-authors. The contribution wants to put this issue into a normative and ethical light. It is based on personal experience from extensive field research taking place in (Red area) Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon (NOSO) and also on findings of ongoing research of team from Uppsala University led by Mats Utas, which is called "Exploring the Research Backstage – Methodological, Theoretical and Ethical Issues Surrounding the Role of Local Research Brokers in Insecure Zones." The author is aware that his empirical findings will not analyse the situation in the Great Lakes region and that they will mainly come from different areas. However, he is convinced that these ethical dilemmas are also present in the research of other African regions.

Key words: qualitative methods, liquid territoriality, small N analysis, red areas, case study, patron-client, field research

Biographical information

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Introduction

Despite its crucial role in shaping the research, the question concerning the background of the research is underrepresented. Nevertheless, with the growing superficies of the areas, which travellers from Western countries are forbidden to visit or at least should not visit according to the recommendations issued by the travellers' governments, the question of data's validity comes into consideration. All researchers, who carry out a research in the so-called "red areas", must deal not only with the issue of their own security, but also of the security and confidentiality of those who are involved in their research. Moreover, with the lack of relevant information coming from the "red areas", researchers' contribution may easily become an authorised source of information for the mass media and may shape the narrative of the situation. These entangled relations and responsibility for one's own security, brokers' confidentiality, interlocutor's representativeness, co-authors' security, and responsibility to the global audience may result in various ethical dilemmas, whose resolution may not be easy.

The aim of this contribution is to open a debate about how to conceptualise certain aspects of research in the "red areas". The contribution starts with a definition of the "red areas", continues with a division of people involved in the research and discusses the biggest risks of their involvement. The first part tries to conceptualise the "red areas" and their definitions in the context of their territorial delimitation in the framework of "liquid territoriality". The second part discusses archetypes of people involved in the research according to two binary structures – their security and necessity of confidentiality against their ability to shape the research. These simplistic and ideal definitions divide people involved in the research into four categories: co-authors, brokers, assistants/respondents, and interlocutors. These categories will be supplemented by examples from F. B. Nymajoh's "Married But Available", where these roles can be clearly identified. Last two parts focus on the crucial question of this research which is the question of representativeness of these people involved in the research and the potential trap of a two-way patron-client relationship between the researcher and other people involved in the research belonging into the above-mentioned categories.

Last but not least, the author would like to emphasize that he did not chose the research in a "red area", but the "red area" has chosen him. As he started with a voluntary mobility in 2015 and continued with his master's thesis and PhD project, the situation in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon, which was the subject of his research, has been steadily evolving towards a current state where it can be described as a "red area". Thus, the ethical dimension of his research in the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon (NOSO) became a central issue of his extensive field research.

Red areas and liquid territoriality

The term "red areas" originates from the travel terminology. Its aim was to express the warning issued by the central authorities. Nowadays, more than 40 states issue travel warnings for their citizens. Some of them are even using maps, where certain areas or whole countries are shown in the colours of travel lights based on the level of risk. Using a case of the United Kingdom, the degrees are 1) green, 2) yellow, where it is "advised against all but essential travels", and 3) red, where it is "advised against all travels". With the current coronavirus situation, the whole African continent has turned into at least the yellow shade and it is advised not to travel at all.

If we look at the map, the "red zones" are usually those areas which supposedly are not under the control of the government. There are countries which are labelled as "red areas" for almost all of their territory, with exception of only a few cities, such as Hargeysa and Barbera in Somalia, Ougadougo in Burkina Faso, or Bangui in the Central African Republic. However, using these maps while doing a research has three significant shortcomings that need to be taken into account. We need to consider 1) the perspective of the person who has created the maps, 2) the question of who the target audience of these maps is, and 3) what these maps may cause. As G. Ó Tuathail (1996: 1) pointed out: "Geography is about power. Although often assumed to be innocent, the geography of the world is not a product of nature but a product of histories of struggle between competing authorities over the power to organize, occupy and administer space." Thus, the maps are not an innocent perception of the reality, but an active actor who creates our perception, while being based on the previous events. Therefore, those red areas are mostly created by the Western governments for the Western tourists. This poses a significant threat to a research based on maps, where the red areas are taken as granted and natural. Hence, I would like to briefly introduce something what political geographers call "liquid territoriality" which allows us to better understand the dynamics of the "red areas" as the liquid territoriality views them as a reactive process, which is based on the previous events. Instead of legitimately marking a potential threat for tourists, maps may create the actual threat. Moreover, becoming a "red area" is way easier than ceasing to be one.

Liquid territoriality is a concept which expects that the control over a territory is changing and is dynamic over time, not only in the long term, but also from the simplistic perspective of a control during the day and the night. Meanwhile, since the 1960s, states have static borders, whereas the non-state actors are trying to control and administer the states' territory (Doboš 2020). The concept of liquid territoriality complicates the realistic approach of international relations and the staticity of the state's sovereignty over territory, although something like a pure state's sovereignty simply does not exist, as highlighted O'Tuathail (2017). Bearing in mind that the creators of the warning maps are governments, the realistic state-centred perspective plays a significant role. However, the key premise for the research in "red areas" is that even those "red areas" are changing and evolving. For instance, the region of NOSO was marked in maps with the red colour in 2016, but certain cities, such as Buea and Limbe, has been temporally withdrawn from the red label. The premise of liquid territoriality allows doing a field research in "read areas", or at least in some of them, especially under the premise that "red areas" are created from the perspective of Western governments, while the reality of people living there may be completely different.

Who is involved and who is shaping the research?

During the field work, the researchers meet many people who are somehow involved in the research. In this context, it does not matter whether we are foreigners or native/local researchers. However, there is always a certain possibility for those involved to somehow shape the research. For a research in safe areas, which is usually connected with enough qualitative and quantitative data, we have three categories of people involved: co-authors as those who can shape the focus of the research, who are involved in preparing its scope etc; research assistants, who collect data; and respondents who have limited ability to shape the research. It does not mean that these last two categories just follow the orders, but their ability to influence the research, especially in the big N datasets, is limited. In this case, all people involved are relatively safe – respondents should be anonymised enough by having huge datasets, while co-authors are able and willing to take full responsibility for data collection and final results.

However, as all of us who were responsible for conducting a research in some "red area" are aware, the research in a "red area" is not similar in its nature. Sure, we can talk about co-authors, research assistants, and respondents, but there are two more types of people involved in this kind of research. Despite their contribution to the research, their security and confidentiality should have an absolute priority. First of them are brokers, who are responsible for shaping the research by providing contact with interlocutors. Interlocutors are those who are offering data required for the research. However, the main problem in this context is confidentiality, trust, and usually only a small possibility of replicability of the research, which is a key component for every academic research.

Thus, these four categories of people compose quadrates based on 1) their security and confidentiality and 2) their ability to shape and focus the research (see table below).

	Endangered	Secured
Significant ability to shape research	Broker	Co-author
Provision of data for the research	Interlocutor	Assistant/respondent

This table shows the ideal roles which are not always as clear as it is shown in the table. However, dividing people involved in the research into these four categories can offer an answer to the main question in the title of this contribution: whether the research in the “red areas” is potentially the “voice for the voiceless” or the “patron-client relationship”.

In this context, the difference between a broker and a co-author in terms of their security also ensures the difference in their responsibility for final results. Whereas the co-authors does not need to be afraid about their security and can publish openly, the broker needs to take into account the security concerns. From this perspective, the broker is becoming dependent on the researcher’s will to conduct the research; inversely, the researcher depends on the broker’s will to co-operate. Using an example of characters from the famous book “Married But Available” by F. B. Nyamjoh, Dr. Lovemore can be easily labelled as a potential co-author, meanwhile he rather shifted himself to the position of broker. The character of Bobinga Iroko, a journalist from the magazine “Talking drum”, can be considered as a research broker who should not be quoted directly, even though he has various tools how to shape the research. Furthermore, the broker’s ability to shape the research may not be noticeable at first sight (Nyamnjoh 2008).

The broker shapes the research by selecting the cases to be included in the research. Consequently, we need to consider the potential trap connected with the interlocutors. Their representativeness is crucial for the research itself, which is known as the problem with the crucial case studies (Gerring 2007). When researchers are talking about crucial case studies, they usually mean extreme or deviant cases. However, in the context of snowball method and dependence on brokers, the ability of brokers to choose representative interlocutors may be limitedly approaching zero (Van Evera 1997).

Patron-client relationship and interdependency

When we are talking about the patron-client relationship in the context of Africa, we usually mean the neopatrimonial models originating from Weber’s charismatic authority, applied by S. Eisendstadt on non-democratic states, and later by J. F. Medard on the state of Cameroon, as for the first time in Africa. Despite the ongoing criticism, this approach has been used in various cases. (Bach, Gazibo 2012) Some of them are for example those describing the relations between secessionist movements (clients) and the involved non-parental states (patron) in Post-soviet regions (Kosienkowski 2020). In these cases, the definition of the patron-client relationship supposes the interconnected benefits for both sides and the clients can in certain aspects strongly influence the patron in issues essential for them. This brings about a crucial question how to decolonize the patron-client relationship when talking about researchers and brokers in Africa.

First of all, it is not sure in this relationship who is the patron and who is the client as both the researcher as well as the broker have potential to fit in both of those two categories. The broker is becoming the patron if they are an essential and indispensable source of information. The reputation of the researcher is put into the hands of the broker who possesses the unique information. On the other hand, the relationship can be the opposite one, which mostly can happen when the researcher becomes the only possible source of income for the broker (Käihkö 2019). Taking into account the limited economic opportunities of people in “red areas”, this may happen quite often. As Käihkö’s research shows that there can be brokers for whom the income from the researchers has become a matter of economic survival.

The second potential decolonial aspect of avoiding the patron-client relationship may be by turning the broker into a co-author. Therefore, the co-author would receive a certain part of the responsibility for data collection, shaping the research, and the final results. However, the rule about the security and confidentiality of the broker cannot be violated in such cases. Thus, the option of the broker becoming a co-author should be considered only when the broker agrees with that.

Voice for the voiceless – the crucial case selection

When we are talking about the small N, which means that there are not many case studies, there is a consensus that there are two approaches for validation of a hypothesis (Van Evera 1997)

The first approach is labelled as using an extreme case to prove a theory. This method is trying to prove the validity of the theory by expecting that it applies in one extreme case which is the most probable case for complying with the hypothesis. This means that when the theory is not valid for this extreme, most probable case, the theory is not valid in general. As we follow in social sciences the Popper’s paradigm about falsifiability, we can prove that a theory is invalid by contradicting it by evidence in a single extreme case.

The second approach is to test out some of the deviant cases which are the least probable to comply with the hypothesis. The deviant cases are usually those that refutes the hypothesis as they warn that the hypothesis may be incomplete. They may help to refine the hypothesis by demonstrating that we forget to put a not negligible variable into the equation. Using this approach, the theory of social science concludes with disproving the hypothesis if it is necessary to add another variable into the equation.

However, both approaches may be quite problematic when the case selection is limited to the snowball method, which is the usual approach how to ensure the research network in the “red areas”. Especially the approach of choosing the extreme cases can put the respondents into jeopardy and it can put a higher pressure on our justification of the case selection, the results, and the reproduction of our findings.

Conclusion

This paper brought up more questions than it explained. However, all of them need to be discussed for ensuring the valuable research in the “red areas”. Firstly, the question of objectivity and classification of the “red areas”, which are not all the same. Especially in the context of the shifting territoriality, we should understand the changing dynamics and its evaluation from the Western perspective.

Second issue concerns the people involved as the co-authors, the brokers, and the interlocutors have different aims, goals, and responsibility that need to be taken into account. We also need to consider decolonising the patron-client relationship, which can evolve both from the researcher-broker perspective as well as from the opposite one.

The last problem to discuss is the case selection and the reproduction of a research. It creates a serious moral dilemma for researchers about the publication of their data. The “cherry-picking” of data may be more attractive for them due to the lower possibility of detection as the reproduction of the research is limited in these cases.

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