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**Controversial, Corrupt and Illegal: Researching difficult topics
in the Global South**

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Controversial, corrupt and illegal: Researching difficult topics in the Global South

Reflections on fieldwork in southern Africa

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"The salaries, that was too low for us to sustain our working . . . It was like slavery. It was just survival of the fittest."

"I was involved in an industrial accident. The Chinese visited the hospital and made some promises to ensure my wellbeing . . . Unfortunately after I was discharged it was a different story . . . The management at the company contrived with the hospital to destroy or hide the file . . . Without this information it is very difficult . . . for me to be compensated in the future."

These quotes come from interviews I carried out with machine operators who were employed in a Chinese clothing factory in Zambia and had worked in awful conditions. The latter worker had lost his lower right forearm in an industrial accident and since, in his own words, had "become a beggar".

As a Masters student, I sat opposite him in a small concrete house and patiently asked my carefully prepared questions. My eye was unavoidably drawn to the stump of his arm dressed in simple bandages. Cut below the elbow, his hand and forearm had been ripped away by textile machinery. As I interviewed him, he gestured with the limb in response to my verbal probing, alternating between calm and considered answers and expressions of outrage towards his former employer. His treatment was both morally outrageous and illegal, as he had never received the compensation payments due under Zambian law and this was illustrative of the horrific working conditions across the factory (see Brooks, 2010).

For me personally, and as an early-career researcher, this fieldwork experience was deeply unsettling, but documenting these issues became part of a project which has contributed to important debates on the controversial nature of Chinese investment in Africa (see Carmody *et al.*, 2011; Giese and Thiel, 2012). Such moments are examples of the type of difficult, but

also prescient issues, with which social research sometimes struggles to engage (Thomas, 1993; Hall, 2012).

In this chapter, I would like to make the case for intensive qualitative research, which uncovers and seeks to explain the causes of inequality. Furthermore, following Paul Rabinow's thought provoking *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*, I argue that social research should be 'problem-orientated' and that the greatest social problems are found amongst poor people in the global South (1977/2007: 18). Frequently the most pressing problems involve difficult-to-research topics, which are challenging to engage with, especially when adhering to increasingly restrictive institutional risk assessment and ethical guidelines.

My reflections in this chapter draw on the 'messiness' of cross-cultural fieldwork, for which researchers cannot always be prepared (Rabinow, 1977/2007). Research about inequality and illegal activity is frequently brief, ephemeral and shallow and can fail to understand the drivers of poverty and modes of exploitation. On the other hand, prolonged fieldwork can enable the researcher to develop lived experiences and enhance rigour, which counteracts the shallowness of 'rapid' research interventions (Gladwin *et al.*, 2002). Real commitment to field research is frequently required to enable access, build trust and understand difficult topics, as well as to enable the researcher to make their own judgements as to what are (or are not) *risky* or *ethical* research interventions.

In this chapter, I discuss some of the ethical and practical challenges of researching difficult topics which involve controversial, corrupt and illegal economic activities. I draw on my experiences from fieldwork in southern Africa using three case studies to illustrate my own successes and failures: the concealed second-hand clothes trade in Mozambique (Brooks 2012a, 2013), corruption in Japanese used-car imports in South Africa and Mozambique (Brooks, 2012b), and labour disputes and Chinese investment in Zambia (Brooks, 2010). Through discussing my interactions with informal market workers, international traders, corrupt officials, factory workers and Chinese business people, I explore the ethical dilemmas of dealing with people engaged in corrupt, exploitative or illegal activities, either as perpetrators or victims. There are various issues to contend with including access, positionality and power dynamics. I also consider practical and theoretical constraints, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of different methodological tools when dealing with these kinds of people. My concluding reflections discuss power relations that I experienced in fieldwork within and beyond southern Africa.

A controversial topic: The second-hand clothes trade in Mozambique

Many used clothes donated to charities are exported from the Global North and sold in markets in Africa. This trade pattern is controversial because of the perceived dishonesty of charities re-selling donated clothing, the high profits made by the private companies involved, the smuggling of used-clothing imports across international boundaries, and the

negative effect on local clothing industries (British Heart Foundation, 2012; Hansen 2000). I researched the trade in second-hand clothes from the UK to Mozambique in my doctoral thesis and linked publications (Brooks, 2012a; 2012c; 2013). When reviewing the literature, I found that the trade had attracted relatively scant academic attention and, as I began to investigate this topic in greater depth, I realised it was going to pose a variety of different ethical challenges.

The commodity chain often begins with charities – including Oxfam, the Salvation Army and YMCA – accepting donations of unwanted clothing. These organisations then sell the clothes on to companies for export to the Global South and profit from this trade. The trade in second-hand clothes has a negative impact on industrial development in Africa, as imported garments out-compete domestically produced clothes and/or eliminate the opportunity for new apparel industries to develop (Brooks and Simon, 2012).

When I was planning my fieldwork, one of the models for research I considered was to work with a partner organisation, as Kleine (2008) had done with wine co-operatives in Chile, or Le Mare (2007) did with *Traidcraft plc*. This type of research engagement can be advantageous, facilitating access to key individuals, but the capacity for critical discourse may be limited by the preferences for certain outcomes and other “political” factors (Chataway *et al.*, 2007). When planning my research, I held firm to the idea that it was *right* to make charities and the businesses they work with the subject for critical analysis rather than my research partners, and to critique their activities as I was concerned that previous research (e.g. Baden and Barber, 2005; Hansen, 2000) had not fully investigated the negative impacts. From my moral standpoint, these actors and the controversial economic activities with which they were engaged, should not escape rigorous scrutiny.

After deciding upon this approach, the major issue was the accessibility of potential research participants at different stages in the commodity chain. My access to different charity workers, business people and traders was reflective of the relative agency that those groups and individuals had in trade networks. I began the research by contacting collecting organisations in the UK by email or telephone, but the responses received were predominately refusals to participate. In general this was a very frustrating process and when I was able to interview people there were practical challenges; repeat phone calls and emails were required to arrange and re-arrange meetings as participants shifted dates and appointments (see also chapters by Chopra, Mubarak and Dam in this volume).

The senior charity managers whom I interviewed were careful, cautious and guarded in their responses to my questions. For example, when the General Manager of Oxfam Wastesaver was interviewed about the export process, I asked “how does a container get to, say, Lagos?” He was quick to question whether that was “a Freudian slip” on my part; he wanted to know if I was trying to catch him out and discover if Oxfam were exporting to Lagos (when the import of used clothing to Nigeria was illegal). In actuality, the question I asked was a follow-up question and I had said Lagos as it was the first large West African port that came to mind. This example demonstrates how the General Manger was acutely aware of the

responses he was giving in the interview and wanted to respond accurately and protect the image of Oxfam.

My interviews in the UK illustrated how the collection, sorting, processing and export of second-hand clothes to developing countries are background fundraising activities which are concealed by NGOs in contrast to their overt charitable programmes which are promoted in their marketing materials (Smith, 2004). These organisations were aware of the potential for critical research to impact negatively upon their income-generating activities (Baden and Barber, 2005; British Heart Foundation, 2012).

By contrast, in Mozambique poor market traders who sold imported second-hand clothes were less knowledgeable about the controversy that surrounded the trade. These relatively impoverished people were willing to participate in the study, but this raised ethical concerns as “giving participants a voice risks revealing their survival strategies” (Manzo and Brightbill, 2007: 33). Throughout this project I did not want to do anything that would harm the incomes of my participants, but I also believed that it was important to examine the broader impacts of second-hand clothing imports on economic development across Mozambique and sub-Saharan Africa, rather than considering the interests of the small group of traders I worked with in isolation (see Brooks and Simon, 2012). Furthermore, the purpose of the research was always explained in advance, the market traders freely participated, and were provided with *per diems* (see further discussion in Brooks, 2012a).

Whilst undertaking my 14 months of fieldwork, I continually assessed the potential risks that my research posed to the individual livelihoods of market traders and concluded that the possible negative effects were absolutely minimal. The immediate outputs of my research (a PhD thesis and linked publications) were unlikely to influence the future availability and market for second-hand clothes in Mozambique. Indeed, I have subsequently presented my research to charity and business audiences in the UK without having any impact on second-hand clothing collections, or downstream effects on the supply of used clothing to the research participants I worked with in Africa. Here there is also a frustrating contradiction and duplicity on my part. Ideally (and unrealistically), I would want my research to have an impact on economic policy (i.e. controls on second-hand clothing imports) and positively influence trading relationships between the Global North and Africa (which has not occurred). Thereafter if this were to occur, I would find it upsetting if the poor people with whom I worked lost their livelihoods, even if the prospective change in policy were to have macro-scale benefits for African clothing industries, which I would welcome (see Brooks and Simon, 2012).

One of the more practical difficulties that I faced in carrying out research in Maputo (Mozambique) was in sampling which, as with many projects undertaken in African cities, was difficult because I had limited prior knowledge about the population structure. As Davis (2004: 24) found there are “formidable theoretical and empirical problems involved in studying the urban poor” and these challenges may be especially difficult to overcome when working with people who are involved in informal sector activities such as trading used

clothes, which can be concealed from local authorities. This often means a more reflexive approach is needed (Kapferer, 1972; Zarkovich, 1993). When I undertook research in Maputo with informal second-hand clothing hawkers who worked on the margins of legality, sampling had to be pragmatic and opportunistic as research of such trading activity could have brought unwanted attention from the police for both the participants and myself (Kamete and Lindell, 2010; Paasche and Sidaway, 2010).

One of the topics that I had wanted to gather information on from Mozambican market traders was the up-stream processes: what was the structure of the commodity chains which connected their sales activity to second-hand clothing donations in the UK and elsewhere? Based on previous pilot research, I had anticipated that these individuals may have a lack of knowledge, but still hoped to gain some information or draw upon these individuals to contact people who did have the answers. This proved unsuccessful.

Instead, I attempted to interview the importers in Maputo directly, but the Indian-owned import companies which bring second-hand clothes to Mozambique proved to be far more difficult to access. I first attempted to make social contact with them through expatriate networks, which previous research had shown to be a successful method for contacting difficult-to-access key informants (Hansen, 2000; Thomas, 1993) (see also the chapter by Wang in this volume on using social networks to access informants). The Indian importers were distrustful of me; in part this can be accounted for by the fact that the South Asian expatriate community did not tend to mix with other international groups in Mozambique and had a distinct socio-history (Pitcher, 2002). I later tried to interview Indian managers at their business premises. Sometimes it was possible to have a 'doorstep interview' whereby I could ask a few questions, but more frequently there was a dismissive response; I was told to return later, go elsewhere or was just ignored (again see chapters in this volume by Chopra, Mubarak and Dam for similar frustrations). One importer was outwardly hostile and I had to leave rapidly. This was at times a very unenjoyable and even traumatic experience and proved to be an unassailable problem, as ultimately participation in interviews has to be voluntary according to ethical research practice (Manzo and Brightbill, 2007).

In an attempt to overcome this problem of access to key informants, I experimented with other techniques. I made observations of second-hand clothing warehouses and asked workers (such as security guards and porters) questions, but they were also reluctant to be interviewed. In addition, my local research assistant visited the warehouses alone and attempted to interview staff. It was envisaged that he would attract less hostile attention than a Western researcher, but in fact he encountered similar problems. These additional informal research processes did allow me to identify principles of the trade processes and also triangulate information acquired elsewhere. However, the activities of importers did remain to a certain extent unknown and when writing up the research in my thesis I encapsulated them by using the concept of a 'black box' (Brooks, 2012c). The inputs (imports of used clothing from the Global North) and outputs (wholesale of second-hand clothes) are known, but there is a lack of clarity as to what happens between the stages and knowledge of these

power laden spaces is policed by inaccessible research *non-participants* (Kitchin and Fuller, 2003; Latour, 1993).

Corrupt practices: Used car imports in South Africa and Mozambique

In contrast to the second-hand clothing industry, I was more successful in engaging used-car importers in South Africa and Mozambique (see Brooks 2012b). This was principally because I was able to cultivate social ties with key individuals in trade networks, although in this case there were limits as to how far I could take the research because of the potential dangers and risks to my own safety.

Second-hand cars are exported from Japan as they have a limited local market there and yet can be re-sold across southern Africa (Dobler, 2008). The international trade in used vehicles is a difficult topic to research because there are many attempts made by both exporters and importers to circumvent market controls such as taxes, customs charges and vehicle regulations. Furthermore “it is not always possible to quote sources of certain information” as trade activities can be “very profitable, somewhat informal and therefore [information is] rather jealously guarded” (Nieuwenhuis *et al.* 2007, 18).

Since concealed, corrupt and illegal activities were all involved in the import of used cars into Mozambique, I felt that it was important that some of the information I gleaned should not be revealed. Although the primary audience for my findings was academics, there was the potential for other traders or the authorities to access the information and I was subsequently contacted by a car trader in Japan about my research findings. Moreover, specific details about transactions could directly damage individuals’ livelihoods or even threaten peoples safety (see also chapter by Fagerholm in this volume on the potential dangers of revealing local knowledge beyond the community). The risk of the latter may seem distant but, as will be discussed below, acts of extreme violence have been linked to the used-vehicle trade in southern Africa.

Before beginning the main field research, I investigated the overall structure of the network which extends from Japan to Mozambique via South Africa using ‘grey sources’ (media stories and company reports). Following this, I undertook preliminary research by visiting car yards, viewing vehicles and having brief interviews with various traders over several weeks. I used ethnographic methods to act as a ‘participant’ in the trade by posing as a customer. In such instances, I was performing a role which was expected of an expatriate living and working in Maputo; indeed during this time I did actually purchase a vehicle that I required to support my other work in Mozambique. This enabled me to glean a general understanding of the trade pattern through an inductive empirical approach, but also allowed me to build up contacts with car traders and spend time establishing trust.

Following this initial phase of research, I began ‘hanging-out’ with traders and having casual discussions about the car trade; this became an increasingly important and deliberate research

strategy and I recorded findings and observations in a fieldwork diary (Gardner 1999). I also interviewed used-car suppliers, importers and customers.

Overall, my methodology followed Beuving's (2004) anthropological research of the used-car trade in Benin: through initial scoping, followed by repeated observation of core and standard processes, I established a detailed overview of the trade network. These observations included documenting processes that occurred in public spaces, such as at customs posts, where it would not have been appropriate to approach people for interview as it was suspected that bribes were being paid. Although there are known and well-documented difficulties and limitations to the subjectivity of observational research (see Hoggart *et al.* 2002), comparable methods had previously been used in Mozambique by Sheldon (2003) and for this difficult topic this mode of research provided vital contextual information.

The subsequent focus of the fieldwork, which formed the main empirical material for an article that I wrote, was a series of transactions I followed in Mozambique and South Africa (Brooks 2012b). I accompanied a Mozambican used-car importer on a two-day business trip from Maputo to Durban and closely followed the processes of importing three different vehicles and the multiple transactions that he undertook during this journey. The trader willingly consented to the research process and I made a contribution to the shared travel expenses.

This in-depth ethnography gave me a detailed and invaluable insight into the corrupt practices that occur within the used-car trade, which would have been otherwise unobtainable. Implementing this method was only possible because I had been living in Mozambique and had the time and opportunity to build up a detailed understanding of the local second-hand car economy, which enabled me to progress from lay to expert knowledge, and more importantly to establish trust and social contacts with a trader. When the research was written up, I took care in what was reported. I did not give details of individual interviews, trade deals or the people involved. Anonymity for informants was very important and in this project it extended to not specifying particular fees, payments or vehicles through which people could have been identified.

The risks associated with both participating in and researching the used-car trade were most pertinently demonstrated by the murder of Orlando José, a senior Mozambican customs official who had investigated the illegal import of cars during the same period when I researching the second-hand car trade (Savana 2010) (see also chapter by Tomei in this volume on research in dangerous places). Following this brutal killing, I carried out my research very cautiously and decided to limit the publication of any material through which participants could be identified. Understanding informal processes and gaining accurate insights into 'underground' economic activity is inherently difficult and my article was based on a small sample, precisely because gaining trust and exploring illegal trade activities is difficult (Harriss 1993; Thomas 1993).

Despite the challenges of this project and the growing constraints on field research – increasingly enforced by ethical review procedures and risk assessment exercises (see Dyer and Demeritt, 2009), the illegalities and corruption in trade networks are realities and social problems with which critical social science research has to engage. This type of research is hard and it is important to acknowledge, without compromising the quality of analysis, that there will be gaps in the information that is collected. Despite these limitations, I believe that research in countries of the Global South should continue to seek to provide insights in to the most pressing of social problems wherever possible even if realistic, practical constraints limit what data can be gained.

Illegal activities: Labour disputes and Chinese investment in Zambia

Chinese investment in Africa has attracted much recent critical work (Brautigam, 2009). However, researchers have found it challenging to access this topic and the majority of publications have been on the international geopolitical scale and have involved macro-analysis of trends, rather than being based on in-depth field research (Carmody *et al.*, 2011). The focus in discourse has been on the controversies relating to human rights, environmental impacts, access to natural resources and – to a lesser extent – the treatment of labour. I chose to research the latter as I believed it was an important social issue that had been neglected. As Lee notes, Chinese business in Africa has been criticised for being “notorious in casualizing its workforce” and paying the lowest wages (2009; 4).

I investigated Chinese investment through a case study which explored the tensions between labour and management in a clothing factory. In contrast to my research on second-hand car trading which anonymised participants, in this study I named the specific factory – Zambia China Mulungushi Textiles (ZCMT) – and its parent company, Qingdao Textiles Corporation. I chose to do this because it would be impossible to ‘anonymise’ this case study as the factory was a nationally-important industrial site and easily recognisable to those familiar with the Zambian economy. Furthermore, and more fundamentally, my study dealt with the repercussions of the actions of a large corporate actor rather than individual people, and I believe that firms operating in southern Africa frequently escape critical attention and such enterprises should bear greater accountability.

This chapter opened with quotes from two of my interviewees at ZCMT. The factory had been forced to close after the business became unviable. This had left many ex-workers unhappy following what they perceived to be their ill-treatment and the broken promises made by Chinese managers. The recent history of the factory had been marked by labour struggles which were influenced by race and gender (Brooks, 2010). For my Masters dissertation, I investigated the labour regimes at ZCMT through 21 interviews with Zambian ex-employees, which were facilitated by a research assistant.

The main challenge with this research was the emotional toll of dealing with impoverished and disillusioned people for whom there did not appear to be any ready solutions to their

plights. Hearing stories of long hours, relentless work, difficult conditions, industrial accidents and unemployment was deeply distressing (see also chapter by Day in this volume for listening to the life-stories of young people). I had substantially under-estimated the likely impact upon myself of dealing with this challenge. I felt that the best approach for me was to try and work towards using the research participants' own words and phrases in my writing to communicate their story effectively (see also chapter by Gent in this volume on debates on reproducing responses verbatim or translating them). When I subsequently presented and wrote-up this research, I was then able to use their voices to embellish the narrative and, after a time, move on from this difficult topic.

When preparing for this research project, I had been preoccupied by the practical details and foreseeing methodological challenges, such as the need to acquire an adequate sampling frame. I had decided upon a snowball sampling technique, because finding and accessing the retrenched employees was anticipated to be problematic, as previous studies had illustrated that *Zambian* workers often 'retreated' from large settlements following the loss of employment (Ferguson, 1999; Potts 2005).

However, in contrast to Ferguson's and Potts' experiences, I found that locating ex-workers to interview was relatively easy as many still lived in settlements adjacent to the factory as they hoped for compensation payments or opportunities for future re-employment on better terms. In fact, the main issue with this research related to the framing of the subject. The study (Brooks, 2010) investigated Chinese engagement from the African perspective: it explored *Zambians'* experiences. When the research was designed in the UK – with limited knowledge and no experience of the issue – I had planned to conduct interviews with Chinese managers as well, to provide further perspectives. However, once I arrived, I found that the Chinese people who had been associated with the Mulungushi factory had left the area and I was unable to access other Chinese elsewhere in *Zambia* to provide another viewpoint.

In contrast, Lee (2009) was more successful in engaging both Africans and Chinese in fieldwork in *Zambia* as well as *Tanzania* and this was achieved through drawing on her own positionality and language ability as a Chinese-American, which helped her gain access to the enclaved Chinese populations. Equally in *Ghana*, Giese and Thiel present a "two-sided account of both the *Ghanaian* employees' and the Chinese employers' perspectives on the employment situation" based on ethnographic research which was rooted in their dual regional specialisations in *West Africa* and *China* (2012: 3).

These two studies offer further perspectives than my own work, but I would argue that valid social research can still be undertaken from a single vantage point, especially when working within realistic constraints such as access to prospective participants. Research is not a neutral process and it is naive to think otherwise. Through discourse analysis we can untangle what we perceive to be the truths within our sample data, rather than merely presenting different sides to the same story. As Boykoff and Boykoff (2004) have expertly discussed with respect to the media framing of climate change debates, 'balance is bias' and presenting both sides of a politicised issue does not always make for the most accurate representation of

reality. As researchers, we need to constantly think critically about the source material from which we draw upon to make conclusions.

Making the case for intensive qualitative research

Development research has been criticised for following an extractive model of ‘data mining’ and having a profound inability to address the pressing demands and needs of research participants (Ferguson, 1999; Hart, 2002). This is especially true for research which involves controversial, corrupt and illegal activities. Successful research projects frequently do nothing to address social problems – indeed my own work has had very limited direct impact on people in Mozambique, South Africa, or Zambia – yet academics’ achievements continue to be measured against publications and citations, whereas for postgraduates the criteria for success are final grades and completed dissertations.

In the field, we can consider measuring success in other ways. The dichotomy associated with cross-cultural research can be alleviated by the researcher offering to share stories and inviting questions about their own life (see also Godbole in this volume) to build a sense of rapport before and after interviews. This can be personally rewarding and bring a different type of achievement to research interventions. Equally I am proud that I have tried to research topics which otherwise escape attention and took satisfaction in bringing difficult topics to an academic audience (Hall, 2012).

Personal engagement may also facilitate research in to difficult topics as I found with my used-car research, but when undertaking prolonged fieldwork in the Global South it is important to maintain a critical distance, especially if informants are engaged with potentially unethical or illegal activities. When I undertook research in Maputo, the institutional support provided by the Instituto de Estudos Sociais e Económicos (Institute of Social and Economic Study), which hosted my research, was invaluable as it provided a detached space for reflection and analysis away from ‘the field’. Rabinow (1977/2007: 38) says that “fieldwork is a dialectic between reflections and immediacy” and *apartness* in a different type of space allows us to recast and collect our thoughts and ideas.

In my experience, fieldwork does not present a succession of coherent encounters; rather each day brings different experiences and information which may or may not be useful. One good interview does not always lead to another. Moreover, I have found that the seemingly irrelevant data gained at the beginning of a research trip can actually prove to be useful several months later. Information is ‘reconstructed’ from research processes and different episodes of fieldwork can be analysed and linked together to provide a coherent narrative of events (Rabinow, 1977/2007: 7).

I believe that extended periods of fieldwork in different cultural contexts allow insights to be developed in the vein of ethnographic inquiry and immersion in developing countries is vital to understanding the conditions of poverty (Iyenda, 2007). The lived experience of being in

southern Africa amongst market traders, car dealers and ex-factory workers challenged my prior assumptions about ‘other cultures’ and enabled me to give more accurate perspectives on their socio-economic circumstances and the problems different people face (Hammersley, 1992: 33; Watson, 2003). Being amongst people is important, but in effective research more has to be done than simply asking questions or collecting anecdotes; responses need to be assessed critically and positioned within a wider context (Hart, 2002; Sender *et al.*, 2006).

Academic preparedness is vital before embarking upon fieldwork, but in my experiences it is as – if not more – important to be prepared for the personal as well as the methodological challenges. Risk assessments and ethical procedures can be useful, but in my opinion constrain research in to difficult topics and can deter early-career researchers from investigating pressing social problems. If before every research activity we were to weigh up *all* the potential consequences for ourselves and the research subjects, consider them earnestly and think about the immediate outcomes, then the probable repercussions, then the possible effects and then finally the ultimately imaginable products of our actions, we would never step foot outside the library.

Practical constraints do of course effect what methods I applied in my research. I was an ‘outsider’ in most my field settings. In some of those contexts I had agency which was helpful in managing the research activity (Skinner, 2008). Foreign status can also make people reluctant to engage with you – or even hostile – as I experienced when attempting to interview Indian traders in Maputo (see also Hanlon, 2009) (see Lunn in this volume for the opposite ‘outsider’ experience). The examples of Lee (2009) and Giese and Thiel (2012) show how prior experience and cultural familiarity can facilitate research.

Research is also a form of power and my positionality affected the outcomes. One of the reasons why market traders and ex-workers were comparatively easy to research in Mozambique and Zambia was because they were curious about the research and were accessible and interested in participating due to the ‘surplus of spare time’, which is common amongst the poor (Rabinow, 1977/2007: 34). Underemployment is an unfortunate phenomenon, but can be an aid to the researcher. In contrast, when researching socio-economic problems it is important to consider that difficult-to-access participants may strive to conceal their activities and seek to avoid any potential publicity. Through these different case studies I have attempted to explore the challenges of researching processes that are informal, illegal, unregulated or concealed and which perpetuate inequality. These are mired in ethical dilemmas and practical difficulties but I feel that research in this vein should be encouraged as it can be personally rewarding, as well as successful in uncovering the causes and consequences of pressing social problems.

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May also need a cross reference to Taylor’s chapter once I have read it and seen the content.

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Recommended reading

For an engaging and highly readable discussion of the messiness of cross-cultural research Paul Rabinow's (1977/2007) *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* remains a landmark.

Robert Chambers' (1983) *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* provides important lessons on the difficulties and potential biases of research in developing countries as well as the importance of focusing on the plight of the most impoverished.

James Ferguson's work in southern Africa and in particular *Expectations of modernity: Myths and meanings of urban life on the Zambian Copperbelt*. (1999) and *Global shadows: Africa in the neoliberal world order* (2007) provide excellent ethnographic studies, especially interesting for anyone keen to learn more about the challenges of fieldwork in the region.

Disabling globalization: Places of power in post-Apartheid South Africa by Gillian Hart (2002) is an inspirational study in to a difficult-to-research topic.

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Biography

Andrew Brooks is a Lecturer in Development Geography at King's College London. His current research focuses on the political economy of Southern Africa and investigates connections between places of consumption and spaces of production, and commodity chains which link the global North and South. He completed his PhD in Human Geography, entitled *Riches from Rags or Persistent Poverty? Inequality in the Transnational Second-hand Clothing Trade in Mozambique*, at Royal Holloway, University of London in 2011., previously he attained a distinction in his MSc in Practicing Sustainable Development at the same institution, both of which were funded by an ESRC 1+3 Studentship. Prior to his postgraduate study Andrew worked for two years for VSO (Voluntary Services Overseas). First as an Education Researcher with the Department of Education in Papua New Guinea where he investigated the impact of the introduction of a new primary school syllabus. Then later, as a Goal Support Officer contributing to International Programme Development in the UK office. Andrew also began his academic studies at King's College and graduated with a First Class BA Development Geography degree and the Departmental prize in 2006. He has written articles and book chapters for leading publications including; *Development and Change*, *Geoforum*, *The Geographical Journal* and the *Journal of Southern African Studies*.