Dilemmas of Self-Representation and Conduct in the Field

Stephen Brown

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Introduction

Researchers often forget that that while we conduct fieldwork, we are ourselves the object of other people's research. A variety of actors are constantly gathering different types of information on us. Most directly, the people we interact with in the course of our research activities, such as interviewees and archivists, form an opinion of us that can influence our access to information. As researchers we are highly dependent on people's goodwill and voluntary cooperation; how we present ourselves to them can thus have a significant impact on our research opportunities. At the same time, other people also collect information on us, out of professional interest or simply curiosity, ranging from fellow passengers in a mini-bus or a waiter at a restaurant to secret police. This information can circulate informally and sometimes formally, through gossip networks and possibly paid informants, in ways that we cannot control—or even track. Not all of this has a direct impact on our research, but the way we interact with people—and the way we represent ourselves—often has a significant indirect influence on our work, including on our emotional well-being.

When the tables are turned on researchers and we become the object of interest, we might prefer to remain vague about our own opinions or hide our own beliefs, not to mention aspects of our personal lives. Likewise, when conducting extended fieldwork in one place, our behaviour and information we reveal outside the research context, including in our spare time, can have an impact on our ability to conduct research. In environments where information spreads quickly, being seen, for instance, socializing with one particular group of actors or having a more intimate relationship with an individual can compromise our "reputation" as a serious and unbiased (or sympathetic) researcher. Not socializing at all might not be sustainable and moreover projects another image that can be interpreted negatively as well. Furthermore, what we reveal in a seemingly innocent or private context can circulate, at times inaccurately, and do harm to our research relationships and even our sense of security. Examples include cohabitation or having children out of wedlock; being gay, lesbian or bisexual; or belonging to a specific religious group

or being an atheist. Dissimulation or lying about these issues may avoid some problems, but raise other ones, such as internal conflict and ethical concerns.

To what extent does our personal conduct matter when in the field, especially when "off duty"? When asked about personal issues that may reveal a controversial answer, how should we respond? Using examples drawn in part from my own experiences, this chapter explores the issues of self-representation and conduct in research situations and sites. It addresses a series of dilemmas upon which other researchers may wish to reflect before being placed in similar situations. I try to avoid being normative and recommending a specific course of action, preferring to promote awareness and invite reflexivity on the part of the researcher. Thinking through these issues ahead of time can help prevent awkward situations and other problems that can handicap and sometimes even abort effective fieldwork. It will also help researchers choose a course of action that is, based on the particularities of their research method and site, as well as their own personal situation, most likely to lead to productive research.

The False Separation of the Selves

It is tempting, but misleading, to think that while in the field we can just separate our "on-duty" researcher selves from our "off-duty" selves. We all play certain roles, assume certain personas, in our everyday lives. While in the classroom, I present myself very differently from when I am having a drink at a colleague's house. I don't reveal the same level of personal information to students as I do to friends. In my home country, I have no concern that being seen in public with certain people or in a certain place, being heard to hold a certain opinion or belonging to a certain group will hamper my everyday professional activities or otherwise cause me any problems. I live in a country where, gossip aside, most people make a clear separation between personal and professional lives. Strong legal provisions at various levels offer protection. Moreover, I work in an institution that by its very nature promotes freedom of thought. My position as a tenured professor provides me with a particularly privileged level of professional security and how people perceive me does not have a significant impact on my day-to-day life or well-being.

When conducting research in the field, I lose that luxury. A researcher's self-presentation and reputation are important for obtaining and maintaining access to information, which is in fact a *sine qua non* of fieldwork, and poses additional challenges in "difficult situations".[1] This is especially the case for those conducting interviews that are longer and more in-depth than mine, or that require permission to consult an archive.[2] Those collecting life-histories require multiple sessions, while researchers involved in lengthy participant-observation or "thick" ethnographic studies normally live for an extended period of time in a "host" community. In such cases, the goodwill of local people and of gatekeepers among power elites is often essential to be able to begin, pursue and complete research. Formal (government) or informal (local "traditional" authority) research clearance can be withdrawn and individual participants can refuse to

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[1] See in particular chapters 6 to 8 in this volume.
[2] My field research typically involves several weeks or months in a distant country, most often in Africa, working on my own or perhaps one other Western researcher. Most of my research consists of one-on-one semi-structured interviews that last 60 to 90 minutes. I normally meet with someone only once during a research trip, though I might interview them again on a subsequent research trip.

collaborate, thereby potentially jeopardizing the project as a whole. Such decisions can be based on opinions and beliefs about us and our work, which may not be accurate but are to a large extent influenced by our behaviour both while "on duty" and "off".

Information about visiting researchers circulates in networks normally beyond our ken. On occasion, I have received an echo of the fact that people were talking about me and my work. For instance, while conducting research in Nairobi in 2001 on international responses (or lack thereof) to so-called "ethnic clashes" in Kenya, a Kenyan NGO official told me that I was making Western aid and embassy officials "nervous". Given what I was finding, I did not interpret this as a bad thing *per se*. It actually confirmed my sense that I was onto something important that many would prefer to leave unexamined.[3] In fact, this person reported this back to me in the context of expressing support for my research, mentioning that it would be extremely difficult for a Kenyan to do it. (Kenyans would be more susceptible to intimidation and any NGO that supported the research could find its donor funding cut or withdrawn.) Perhaps he meant it in part as a caution, though I felt no need to modify my behaviour as a result.

Though I did not quite think it through at the time, this indicated that subsequent people I contacted might already know something about me and my work and prepare their responses in consequence. Beyond the sensitivity of my topic, other information about me could be circulating: Was I seen as astute and well-prepared or naïve, ill-informed and easy to lead astray? Open to new ideas or had I already made up my mind on what I wanted to find? Objective or a trouble-maker? Perhaps shortly after I began this field research, word had already gone out across Nairobi on what kind of a researcher and a person I was. I am unable to gauge how this affected my research, positively or negatively, in terms of the quality and veracity of information. For the work I was doing, access was not difficult to negotiate and probably not affected. Where there is a higher risk that key informants could refuse to participate or that a person of authority could shut down the research project, the implications of such "nervousness" could be much direr.

The separation of the public and the private is a fiction that is hard to maintain in most research sites. The majority of research in difficult situations takes place in far more intimate setting than the example I give above, interviewing mainly Western officials and national elites in a very large urban area. Information circulates much faster in smaller cities and faster still in small towns, rural settings or refugee camps, including through an informal communication network sometimes known as the "bush telegraph". We researchers are alien oddities and we often inquire about sensitive or unusual issues. It is normal for people to be curious about, discuss and judge us. How best to prepare for this fact?

Professional Conduct

Earlier chapters in this volume deal in great depth with ethical and security issues, as well as how to obtain access. Marie-Joëlle Zahar's chapter specifically analyzes the implications our perceived or actual identity and interests. It is amply clear that professional conduct is important. Our ability to gather useful information and sometimes even our personal security depend on it.

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[3] The result of this research was published as Stephen Brown, "Quiet Diplomacy and Recurring 'Ethnic Clashes' in Kenya", in Chandra Lekha Sriram and Karin Wermester (eds.), *From Promise to Practice: Strengthening UN Capacities for the Prevention of Violent Conflict* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2003), pp. 69-100.

Here I will allow myself to be normative: While "on duty", researchers should generally be polite, respectful, punctual, patient, humble, appropriately dressed and non-judgemental, among other things. Demonstrating a commitment to protecting the interviewees' identity, if requested, and otherwise respecting the ethical codes of research are also particularly important. At times, however, we might need to push a bit harder to get a proper answer to a question—but we also need to gauge when insisting will actually be helpful. There can be a fine line between good investigative technique and what could be interpreted as inappropriate rudeness. When meeting with interviewees or other people in the context of our research, we need to be attentive to their clues on when to move from pleasantries to discussing "business" and on when to change topics, move on to the next question or bring the meeting to an end. I try to leave my ego at the door and absorb as much as I can from the interview. On only very few occasions, I have felt hostility from an interviewee, even contempt, mainly for people like me in general: white/Western graduate students/academics who fly in, poke around and fly out, writing a Ph.D. thesis or publish and perhaps even make a career on other people's life-and-death problems. This is a valid critique and I try not to take it personally. On almost all occasions, however, people I talked to were extremely gracious and generous with their time, setting a tone that I needed only follow.

My own experience, however, does not cover the range of possible interlocutors. Almost all of the people I have interviewed are either Western officials working in Africa or a relatively Westernized local elite, be they in government, academia or "civil society", based in the capital city. Every single one of my hundreds of research interviews to date has taken place in a European language. I have never used an interpreter. As such, the cultural divide is not so vast. We speak the same language, both literally and figuratively, and my interviewees are used to talking to people like me. If I unknowingly commit an offense, they will be more likely to contextualize it. The task is far more complicated for researchers interacting with everyday people in cultural contexts where they do not know local codes. Under such circumstances, appropriate behaviour is less intuitive and researchers are far more likely to be the object of interest—and potentially being misunderstood. Greater preparation, for instance on language and societal norms (including dress codes), and increased attention to subtle cues can mitigated this risk.

Most researchers are sensible and sensitive enough to realize the importance of professionalism while conducting research. Beyond the few comments above, I do not wish to draw up a list of do's and don'ts. So much of it is basic common sense. What is less obvious, however, are a few other aspects of self-representation, to which I now turn: "off-duty" behaviour, more intimate relationships and responding to personal questions.

Off-Duty Behaviour

As mentioned above, people like me—and presumably most people reading this book—can, during their everyday activities, keep a relatively clear separation between their life at work and their personal lives. It is not complete or unproblematic, but relatively easily managed. In the field, especially under difficult circumstances, this is next to impossible. The public and the private spheres can become almost indistinguishable. In some instances, including when using feminist methodologies, the bonds of empathy and shared experience can actually be prerequisites for research.

It is very hard to keep secrets in the field; news travels fast by bush telegraph. Foreign researchers are easily identified, especially if white in a country with few white people. When I worked for the United Nations in Oman, I remember an Omani co-worker, who greeted me one morning and said, "So you went to Nizwa last weekend…". Apparently, a friend of his—whom I did not even know—had seen me and reported back to him. Another officemate once told me that she had seen my car parked at specific residential area the previous night. She then (half?) jokingly asked, "Who is she?" These were innocent enough questions, but it certainly felt like surveillance.[4]

While conducting Ph.D. research in Lilongwe, Malawi, I had no car; I took public transportation where available and did a lot of walking. I soon realized people knew a lot about me. Hawkers remembered what I had bought or even just looked at, sometimes months later. A private security guard at the main post office once greeted me by name, though I had never had a conversation with him before. On occasion, taxi drivers already knew where I was staying before I told them. What else was circulating about me? In particular, was the company I was keeping a problem? The majority of people with whom I socialized during my four months in Malawi were American, most of whom worked for the US government, mainly the US Agency for International Development. A few others worked for the UN or an NGO. Most worked in the health sector, whereas I was conducting research on democratization, so at least I did not interact with them in the course of my work. I considered myself very lucky to have found interesting and kind people who included me in their social activities and helped me find temporary accommodation. They also kept me from feeling bored and isolated.

Did this come at a price? It is hard to tell. I have no doubt that many Malawian officials and donor representatives (my main interlocutors) saw me around town, noted with whom I was socializing and associated me with the American government crowd—or hear about it through the grapevine. Once a US Embassy security guard let me through to someone's office without checking for identification or phoning ahead—clearly against security protocols—presumably because he thought I was an American official. This identification with American government circles probably compromised people's perception of my objectivity. Few probably even realized that I was Canadian, especially since I was at the time based at an American university. I would like to believe that my explanation of my research and my interview questions would have made clear that I was not taking the US government's line, or any other's. Still, how could what was "known" about me not colour people's perception of me and interaction with me?

What else did people "know" or think they knew about me? As a graduate student on a low budget, I actively sought out free accommodation. I stayed at eight or nine different places during my four months in Lilongwe, mostly as a house-sitter, though sometimes as a guest. (Many expatriates were happy to have someone like me stay in their home while they were away on holiday or mission to keep an eye on things. I in turn jumped at the chance of having the run of a real house, access to a kitchen, telephone and a television, once even a car.) Did people impugn anything about my relationship with my various hosts, be they male or female? In the course of various conversations, I heard many tales about which foreigner was sleeping with

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[4] This example and two other ones below pertain to UN employees rather than actual researchers. As foreigners temporarily in the country, some of their experiences are relevant to my discussion here. As staff members of an international organization, however, they benefit from easier access and greater institutional support than researchers, including if the situation becomes truly difficult. Their off-duty behaviour is less likely to have an impact on their work, especially when they enjoy diplomatic immunity. NGO officials are presumably more affected by these issues than UN staff, but less so than most researchers that lack institutional backing.

whom. I once heard back about a conversation at USAID about whose boyfriend I was or was not.

Should I have behaved any differently while in Malawi? Should I have cloistered myself in a cheap hostel and avoided being associated with anyone in particular? It would probably have improved my image as an objective researcher, but at what cost? It would have reduced my productivity in some ways, notably by eliminating easy access to a telephone, which was necessary for setting up interviews. (This was in 1997-98 and I did not use a cell phone in the field, as one now can do quite easily.) It certainly would have had a strong negative impact on my emotional well-being. Field research can be intense and isolating. Having drinks or dinner with people, going to a party or partaking in weekend leisure activities do much to restore balance. It also would have created a new security problem, not so much for me personally as for my laptop. As far as I could tell, nobody really seemed to care about my "off-duty" activities—but not all situations are so innocuous. At times, the company we keep can have a tangible influence on our research and security, especially in difficult situations.

Consider the example of a relatively young European male employed by the United Nations in a Central American country emerging from civil war.[5] By day, he worked in his office, representing an international organization closely involved in the negotiation and implementation of peace accords. In his spare time, he liked to hang out with senior members of the former guerrilla army, then in the midst of reconfiguring itself as a political party. This was clearly a great opportunity for him to learn about revolutionary movements and hear first hand about the struggle. He presumably also sympathized with their politics. His fraternization did not go unnoticed. Complaints found their way back to his UN superiors about his lack of neutrality, followed by death threats. He was urgently reassigned to a UN office in another county.

Should he have behaved differently? Does being a UN official by day mean that he cannot have drinks in the evening with whom he wants? Should his boss have prohibited him from this type of activity? Or at least warned him? Or should he have been more discreet about meeting in public or at least have been prepared for the consequences, however extreme they turned out to be? Is declining to have drinks with actors on one side in a politically polarized situation the wise thing to do or is it a conservative bureaucratic reaction to a potentially fascinating opportunity? After all, he did not take this posting to stay home and watch videos or just hang out with other UN international staff.

There are no clear answers. As researchers, we want to maintain a positive reputation, often linked to impartiality and objectivity. At the same time, we need to work under conditions that protect our mental well-being, which is after all necessary for productive fieldwork. Moreover, declining social invitations could actually be considered rude and also be detrimental to our reputation. The challenge is to find the balance that is right for us, given the particularities of our fieldwork—methodology, duration, types of partners—and our own personal needs.

Don't Date the Data?

The thorniest question related to off-duty behaviour is probably the issue of romance and—let's not hide behind euphemisms—sex. When in the field, do we have to become asexual? Or is it OK to flirt, go on a date, engage casual sex or enter into a relationship? Though some thesis advisors warn their students not to "date the data", I want to avoid the should-or-shouldn't

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[5] This is a true story, but I am being deliberately vague about the details to protect the person's identity.

approach to this issue. Many people I know have actually formed lasting, loving relationships with someone they met while conducting research, either another expatriate or a person from that country. The longer the research trip, the more likely we are to get involved with someone in the field. And these relationships can affect our research in various ways. Individual researchers can make their own choices; I want to help them understand the issues and think them through.

As mentioned above, doing research can be a very isolating experience. Paradoxically, it can sometimes also be a very intense one, where close personal relationships can form very quickly, especially when in what this volume identifies as "difficult situations". Being away from home and from family and friends can lead to an almost instant intimacy with others who are in a similar position. These social circles can sustain our research by helping us decompress, as well as serve as support networks in times of stress, provide helpful guidance and help us resolve certain problems. A close relationship with a specific person can do all of this, as well as provide additional personal support. A relationship with a local person in particular may also provide useful insight into local culture and help improve language skills.

Also, being in a strange environment can also make us suspend our usual behavioural self-regulation. In a sense, we feel that "the normal rules don't apply" and can find ourselves doing things we would never do in our regular lives, in part because we are faced with new situations and opportunities. Moreover, we know that our fieldwork will come to an end and we will go home, sometimes without any plan to return. We tend to think that, as in a trip to Las Vegas, "What happens in the field stays in the field". Sometimes, the Jiminy Cricket that is our conscience stays home or, put in Freudian terms, our id supplants our super-ego. Solitude and boredom can make us do a number of things we would not normally do, not all salacious. In my case, these included participating in a weekly "dart night" at a USAID employee's home or attending a volleyball tournament where the players were almost all expatriates. I found this somewhat embarrassing, since these are not types of activities I partake in at home and furthermore participating so willingly in an "expat scene" did not correspond to the image I had of myself in the field. Still, such social activities can be useful coping mechanisms that enhance mental well-being and thus actually make a research trip more successful than it otherwise would be.

On the topic of romance and sex, I prefer not to discuss my own personal experiences. Instead, I draw on an example provided by Heidi Postlewait in a book she co-wrote with two former UN colleagues, *Emergency Sex and Other Desperate Measures*. In it, the three friends take turns chronicling a decade of work on various UN peacekeeping missions. Of the three, Postlewait is most detailed about her love life and coins the term that found its way to the book's title, though by no means is it the central theme of the book. She clearly illustrates the rapid and at times urgent intimacy that often develops in difficult situations. In the following passage, she describes how, while working for the UN Mission in Somalia, she and a Somali translator with whom she is having a relationship come under sniper fire:

> Yusuf and I get up and run around to the safe side of the building. And then the strangest thing happens. I want to rip my clothes off, rip Yusuf's clothes off, and just fuck him right there. I can feel this pounding inside me and I can't wait. It has to be right now, not in ten minutes, not five. Now. An Emergency. Emergency Sex.[6]

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[6] Kenneth Cain, Heidi Postlewait and Andrew Thomson, *Emergency Sex and Other Desperate Measures: A True Story from Hell on Earth* (New York: Hyperion, 2004), p. 139.

In an interview, Postlewait explained the rapid closeness and physicality as follows:

> Everything is intensified and magnified—friendships, your faith, your desire to stay alive. Andrew [Thomson, a co-author of the book] said something about the sex being an antidote to that feeling of being near death. "Emergency sex" is a metaphor for that intensity. People out there don't have their usual family support systems. You don't have a daily routine. You're really needy. You're seeing terrible things. In a month, you're in a kind of relationship that would take three or four years here [in the United States]. They don't generally last [...] which is probably a good thing.[7]

Only rarely are UN mission or research trips that dangerous, but otherwise stressful conditions can provoke a similar response. How might romance and sex affect our research?

Anecdotal evidence suggests that a woman is more likely to be judged more negatively than a man for entering into a sexual relationship in the field. Postlewait's encounters certainly received far more attention in book reviews and newspaper articles than did her male co-authors'. Same-sex relationships are usually more stigmatized than heterosexual ones. In some cases, extramarital sex or homosexuality may even be illegal in the research site.

It is virtually impossible to keep such secrets in the field—and we need to therefore assume that information will circulate. Our attempts to present ourselves as an "objective" researcher can suffer greatly if we are known, for instance, to be literally in bed with the US embassy or a politicized identity group and thus widely assumed to be figuratively in bed with them as well. Moreover, many researchers will find that men and women mingle more freely in their home country than at their research site. In such circumstances, a man and a woman being seen together or being known to have spent time alone together is likely to lead to assumptions about the nature of the relationship. Even if it is a platonic friendship, people may well assume it is a sexual relationship—and reputations may suffer. In many places, no matter how chaste she really might be, a woman who entertains one or more men in her hut, hotel room or other dwelling, or even is seen drinking with a man in public, is liable to be considered promiscuous or even labelled a prostitute.

Once something is "known" about us, once a negative reputation is made—whether based on truth or not—it is almost impossible to undo. Opportunities and goodwill may evaporate and, in some circumstances, we may find ourselves *persona non grata* in the very place we need to be to carry out our research. As researchers, therefore, we need to make informed decisions on getting romantically involved or even giving a public impression that a relationship may be sexual, weighing the personal benefits against the probability of negative impact on research. The only real mistake would be to assume that no one will know, that it is purely our own business, that what we do on our spare time does not matter.

Answering Personal Questions

Even if our on- and off-duty conduct in the field is beyond reproach by local standards, we are sometimes faced with personal questions that we may not wish to answer. Though it may be no

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[7] Suzy Hansen, "Sex and drugs in hell: The authors of *Emergency Sex and Other Desperate Measures* talk about keeping body and soul together in the killing fields of Cambodia, Somalia and Haiti", *Salon.com*, 8 July 2004, available at <http://dir.salon.com/story/mwt/feature/2004/07/08/emergency_sex/index1.html>, accessed 3 May 2008.

secret in our regular lives back home, we may prefer to avoid revealing at the research site certain information that may lead to us being stigmatized—such as religious affiliation (or not believing in God); living with a partner or having children without being marriedl; or being in a same-sex relationship. We can avoid some problems by not revealing this information or by lying. However, such strategies can lead to other problems, including unease with ourselves for lacking honesty.

Friendly people all over the world engage in conversation with outsiders and solicit information on what we may consider to be our private lives. Women especially are often asked about their marital status or if they have children. (I suspect that men are more likely to ask the former and women the latter.) Though seemingly innocuous, such questions can actually become loaded. Saying she is single may lead directly to a difficult question on why. It could also expose her to an undesired increase in sexual attention. Saying she is married can lead to problematic comments, such as "If your husband really loved you, he wouldn't let you be here on your own" or "What kind of a woman are you to come here and leave your husband behind?" Revealing that we are cohabiting can provoke a negative moral judgement. Being in a same-sex relationship is most often considered far worse, even if legally married (as is possible in a few places). When engaging in research, it is certainly generally desirable to avoid being overtly condemned or denounced as immoral, including being branded a sinner. Researchers might not want to share openly other types of personal information as well, despite being quite open about it at home. For instance, they might prefer not to reveal being Jewish in a country where they think saying so could impede research or put them in an awkward or vulnerable situation. Likewise, being openly lesbian, gay or bisexual might cause problems in some places.

What to do when asked personal questions if an honest answer might be counterproductive? What kind of strategies can we adopt? One possibility is to lie. I have heard of a professor who systematically tells her single female students going to do work abroad to invent a husband and wear a wedding ring. I completely understand why a researcher may chose to do so, especially if she feels it enhances her personal security or prevents her from being seen as a threat by other women. Though useful and perhaps advisable under some circumstances, I find it a bit odd that a professor recommend premeditated falsehoods across the board. Lying is based on certain negative assumptions about the behaviour of people in the research site and their inability to deal with the truth and difference.

Though lying may provide an easy answer, it can exact its own price. Researchers may have moral qualms about lying or consider it an inappropriate way to establish a research relationship, which normally requires a bond of trust. Moreover, for people who are proud—or at least not ashamed—of their status, lying can leave researchers feeling displeased with themselves. For instance, sexual minorities from an environment where "coming out" is the norm, hiding or lying about their sexual orientation may cause inner conflict or feelings of personal cowardice and betrayal of the self or the community. The same could be true in other examples, such as religion. Moreover, "coming out" as gay, Jewish, or some other potentially stigmatizing identity could actually constitute an opportunity to break down stereotypes and fight prejudice.

Lies might also prove difficult to sustain, especially when spending an extended period of time in one research site. For instance, people may begin to doubt the existence of an alleged spouse or fiancé(e) if there are insufficient signs of communication, such as letters, or content that betrays a platonic relationship, for instance phone calls that people may overhear or actively

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listen in on. As a result, the researcher could earn the reputation of being a liar, which harms research relationships.

My strategy is to be as evasive as possible about information I would rather not share, without lying. For instance, in English, we can try to use non-gendered words like "partner" to avoid revealing a same-sex relationship. In many languages, however, nouns have masculine and feminine forms. A way around this is to use an unspecified "we" or refer to the relationship itself instead of the spouse. For instance, an exchange with a taxi driver in Rwanda in 2007:

>**Him**: Are you married?
>**Me**: Sort of. I am in a common-law relationship, which in Canada is almost the same as being legally married.

I do not know what he made of my response, but we moved on to another topic.

It is harder to dodge the question of children. In many societies, childless people can be objects of pity. A man and especially a woman without a child are often considered incomplete, unfulfilled, not fully adult, sometimes even unwilling to or incapable of meeting societal duties. Reproducing is also tangible proof of a man's virility.

I used to have what I though was a great explanation for my lack of offspring. I vividly remember—probably because of my discomfort at the time—a discussion I had with a friend of the Nicaraguan family I was living with in a working-class neighbourhood of Managua in 1987. Our conversation went something like this:

>**Him**: Do you have any children?
>**Me**: No, I don't.
>**Him**: Why not?
>**Me**: I'm too young to have kids.
>**Him**: How old are you?
>**Me**: Twenty.
>**Him**: I already had two kids by the time I was 20.
>**Me**: Different cultures, I guess [*laughs uncomfortably*].

I am now too old to offer that explanation of my childlessness. Maybe I could just say because I am not married—though then they would probably ask me why that was… Last time someone expressed sympathy for my childlessness, I admitted to not really wanting to have children of my own. It has the advantage of being true, but that might stigmatize me as a selfish person. My answer left the person who asked, a Kenyan woman who had just expressed her joy at having two children of her own, looking rather horrified. I tried to assuage her pity for me by assuring her that in my culture not having children was not seen as a terrible thing. She did not look convinced, but we are able to shift conversation to another topic. I am not sure how effective cultural relativism–based arguments are.

Religious affiliation is not often raised in my everyday life—nor is it likely to be in the "off-site" lives of most researchers. The topic of religion, however, has come up much more often in the field. Pentecostals have quizzed me on my beliefs and tried to get me to attend a service at their church. One hotel registration form (at a Holiday Inn, of all places, in Southern Oman) had a line for me to indicate my religion. I am not sure why; probably something to do with liquor licensing and maybe having a mini-bar in my room. I just left it blank and no one objected. I have yet to develop a proper response to what seems to most to be a simple question.

Especially in places where having a religion is akin to having an ethnic group, my lack of one risks baffling people—and may be seen as the worst possible answer.

Truth-telling has the advantage of simplicity and sincerity, as well as respect for the interlocutor, but could make research more complicated—either because people will be unfavourably predisposed or seek to disengage. It could also make a researcher uncomfortable if the truth is something he or she would rather not talk about. Lying, however, can also cause the researcher some discomfort and lies may be revealed later on, breaking any bond of trust. Either way, the researcher's discomfort with these questions can cause him or her to respond awkwardly or aggressively, neither of which is propitious for building a research relationship. Even answers that dissimulate the truth, without outright lying, may sit uncomfortably with the researcher, as it feels less than honest.

One way to avoid uncomfortable questions is to not ask them of other people, thus making it a topic of conversation. This might also not be possible, depending on the type of research being conducted. In many cases, asking personal questions may be part of the research process. We also risk being perceived as overly formal and disinterested, even rude and lacking in reciprocity. In some cases, it might be possible simply to respond firmly that we does not wish to discuss such personal matters—at the risk of being found cold and distant—and then change the topic, for instance to local politics, on which most people will happily speak volumes. Better yet, a witty non-response can go a long way, even if rehearsed.

Conclusion

This chapter has addressed some of the most pertinent issues of self-representation and conduct while undertaking field research and their impact on fieldwork. It has presented the particularities of conducting research in difficult situations, notably the impossibility of separating our personal lives from our fieldwork in a context where we, as outsiders, are highly visible and information about us circulates in ways we cannot know. It also explored the challenges and possible strategies for responding to them, namely "on-duty" conduct, "off-duty" behaviour, including intimate relationships, and how to deal with personal questions that inevitably arise.

As researchers, we are faced with a number of dilemmas. How we chose, whether consciously or unconsciously, to respond to them can have a significant impact on our research relationships, our access to necessary information and sometimes even the viability of our research. How to find the right balance between professional conduct and personal well-being, even outside the narrowly defined research context? When might lying or dissimulation enhance research productivity more than being explicit with the truth? What are the trade-offs in adopting one strategy, rather than another? And how can we make informed decisions based on unknown (if not fully unpredictable) consequences? What to do when all options can potentially interfere with the quality of our research and our personal well-being while conducting fieldwork?

The right option—if there is one—depends on the idiosyncratic mix of who the researcher is, who the interlocutors are and what the situation on the ground is. This will often require a snap judgement, which could prove in retrospect not have been the wisest choice. To improve the odds of dealing with the situation as well as we can, the best strategy is to think through ahead of time how best to conduct ourselves and how best to react to hypothetical situations and thus be prepared if and when they arise.