Notes on gatekeepers and the production of knowledge in and about the postcolonial humanities

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Abstract

This brief notes piece describes preliminary thoughts on conducting anthropological fieldwork with anthropologists and other academics as one's respondents or informants. The piece outlines the processes of gatekeeping that are involved in conducting an ethnography *of* the university: both those processes that are bureaucratic or ethical, and those that are driven by the norms of the discipline and the sorts of things that are considered valid of study.

KEYWORDS: studying up, politics of knowledge, Southern Africa, higher education

Introduction

The call to study "up" is not new. Nonetheless, in the southern African context in which I live and work as an anthropologist, the majority of ethnographic work still tends to focus on spaces of marginalisation (Morreira 2012; Nyamnjoh 2012). We are schooled to study down. In part, this stems from the global politics of knowledge production: ethnography in and of Africa is best able to be funded, published, read or cited if we write about things that funding bodies and/or other anthropologists find worthy of examination. These are not always the same things African scholars are interested in (Zeleza 1997). Debates about the politics of knowledge production are thus ongoing in Africa, because they are still deeply relevant. In this piece, I describe some preliminary thoughts on the process of turning the gaze onto anthropologists and other academics in the humanities in South Africa. This brief note thus presents two excerpts from fieldnotes taken during an ethnographic study of the ways in which ideas about Africa are taught in a postcolonial university, in order to explore the kinds of gatekeeping one encounters when studying up, and the effects of this on the production of knowledge.

Vignette 1: Upon getting ethical clearance to do fieldwork in the university

A comparison of ethics procedures

Situation 1: ethnography outside the university. In such an instance, the process of ethics clearance is overseen by a Faculty Committee, which has the right to devolve deliberations to a department level committee. Step 1: Present one's plans to the Ethics Committee, who deliberate and either grant clearance or, Step 2, ask for alterations to the plan before deliberating again. Ethical clearance is taken very seriously. People who know the discipline and understand the methods and the context in which one is going to be researching give comment on the most ethical ways to do the work, and to inform and protect informants and researchers alike. Once ethical clearance is granted, research may begin.

Situation 2: ethnography *of* the university as part of a multi-disciplinary team. This is slightly more complex. Step 1: find the right ethics committee for a faculty wide, multi-disciplinary project. This may take some time. Step 2: submit a proposal, with accompanying consent forms, and project descriptions, and approximate numbers of courses and staff and students who would be involved. This is also taken very seriously, and rightly so. If approval is granted, move to Step 3: show ethics clearance to the Human Resources department, so that they can approve access to staff. Finally, Step 4: approval from the Department of Student Affairs in order to approach students.

This first excerpt presents a reason commonly given for not conducting ethnographic work within academia: it is harder to access staff and students as respondents than it is to do work "in the real world". While it does show that the steps are somewhat more complicated, it seems to me that it also shows that the processes are more similar than different, and they seek to protect respondents in the same way. Universities are protected spaces, but they are by no means impossible to access. The next vignette thus speaks to some other reasons that might underlie the reluctance to study academic practice.

Vignette 2: On asking one's colleagues to be research participants

I don't think I have ever felt as nervous about negotiating access to a research site as I did today. I had done research on powerful people before, when I worked with lawyers and human rights activists, but today it was much closer to home. I sat outside the office of my previous Head of Department, waiting to be called in to explain my latest project and to see if he, the "gatekeeper" to "the field" in this instance, would let me in. The surroundings were entirely familiar: this, the administrator's office where I had handed in my own doctorate, and where I had collected a paycheque for working as a tutor and part-time lecturer for years. Here, an old calendar print on the wall that I have seen many times. There, the timetable for use of the departmental seminar room. But today it felt different to be there: today I was asking if the anthropologists would let me in to do an ethnography of their teaching practice. Somehow, this suddenly seems a very big thing to ask. What if it goes wrong? This is where I work.

He calls me inside; we chat socially for a time and ask after each other's families. He asks how my new job, in an education unit in another part of the faculty, is going. We smile. I use the question to segue into the new project: an examination of the ways in which Africa is taught within the humanities curriculum, an exploration of the ways in which students' sense of identity is or isn't brought into the classroom, an exploration of pedagogy and curriculum in the postcolony. I explain, I wait. I am very nervous. Did I rush the explanation? Did it seem "professional" to him? Did it seem to be the way an anthropologist should negotiate access to the field? Did I cover everything? What if he doesn't think it sounds 'anthropological' enough? What if this isn't something he thinks I should study? We're not used to our colleagues seeing us in this way. They're not used to me seeing them in this way. I wait. He smiles, seeming pleased. 'But this is what we've been waiting for!' he says, 'We're looking at ourselves, interrogating our practices, excavating our concepts. Of course you are welcome.' I laugh. I am relieved, for now. But I am still nervous about the fieldwork to come, about subsequent encounters when I do this again with other anthropologists, other academics. These are my colleagues. This is where I work.

These vignettes present two forms of gatekeeping: one is institutional and largely bureaucratic, while the second is driven by the politics of knowledge production. The internal gatekeeping to which I subjected myself – What if he doesn't think it sounds "anthropological" enough? What if this isn't something he thinks I should study? – was born of the habitus of *Homo academicus* and the fears I had about what constitutes valid research subjects and valid and worthy (publishable) knowledge (Bourdieu 1988). I found it much harder to ask colleagues if I could research their courses than I previously found it to ask, for example, human rights lawyers if I could do participant observation in their offices. Both groups constitute studying up or studying vertically. But only one involves doing so in one's own place of work, and with experts in one's field. Did my topic constitute a valid form of enquiry in African anthropology? I thought it did, but would they?

What this excerpt reveals most to me now, as I read it anew, is the anxiety I felt upon trying to gain a different sort of access to an academic community within which I already belonged. In researching my own colleagues, much more was personally and professionally at stake than when doing research outside of the university community. It is harder to ask people you know to be on the receiving end of your gaze than it is to ask strangers. It is harder still if the conventions of the field mean you are unsure of whether your interest will be welcome or considered legitimate, particularly when you ask it of people who are closely implicated in your career: people who might sit on the board that assesses your promotion application in five years' time; people who edit journals that you send papers in to; people whose worlds are very close to your worlds. But while it is disconcerting to conduct research amongst one's colleagues, it is also liberating, as it means that the power dynamics of global knowledge production that are often unspoken can be spoken about, and that anthropologists from the South – who are very aware of where they should publish, what they should publish, and how they should represent Africa in so doing – are able to reflect on, and speak back to, this process.

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