

**Embodiment, Positionality and Self-presentation:
Informant Perceptions and Qualitative Data**

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This paper examines the ways informants' perceptions of researchers influence the data they provide. Our data, I contend, is shaped not only by the questions we ask and how we ask them, but by who we are, or are perceived to be. Researcher's embodiment, position/positionality, and self-presentation influence informant perceptions and affect our data collection. The discussion focuses on interview-based, ethnographic, and participatory research. This exploration of the relationship between informant perceptions and data draws from the research methods literature and my experiences conducting research on nature tourism and local politics in southern Africa. While my principal concern is with empirical qualitative research, the issues I will discuss also apply to other social science research in which data is generated through interpersonal interactions. The paper is organized as follows. After briefly outlining why informant perceptions matter, I define embodiment, position and positionality, and self-presentation, and discuss how each may affect researcher-informant interactions. I then reflect upon my experiences researching nature tourism and local politics in Botswana and South Africa, examining how my physical attributes and positionality appeared to influence both my access to data and the data which was provided, and discussing how I dealt with those effects. I conclude with a call and assessing for greater attention to research praxis in the growing disciplinary qualitative methods literature.

Much of the energy in contemporary qualitative methodological debates centers on questions of design and analysis. Scholars have debated the analytic leverage provided by data-set and causal process observations (King 2001; Collier et al. 2004; Beck 2006), discussed conceptualization and measurement (e.g. Adcock and Collier 2001; Collier and Levitsky 1997), and elaborated different approaches such as typological analysis (George and Bennett 2005), fuzzy-set analysis (Ragin 2000), path dependence and counterfactual analysis (e.g. Pierson 2000;

Tetlock and Belkin 1996), inter alia. Research practice has garnered some attention in the discipline (e.g. de Volo and Schatz 2004; Goldstein 2002), but qualitative data collection and observation processes have generally received less attention in political science than in cognate disciplines.¹ This neglect is unfortunate because our observations are the basis for our inferences; they are our data.

Many of us generate our data by interacting with other people—interviewing them, surveying them, or observing and sometimes participating in their activities. Skillful researchers devote a great deal of attention to planning these interactions or structuring our observations so that they will provide useful data without harming the respondents. And we continue to analyze our informants' attributes and our behavior while in the field site. What is this informant's role within the setting? Is he influential or marginalized? Is she knowledgeable? Is he trustworthy? Does this informant actually possess the characteristics that led us to request an interview with him or her? Is this person, group, event a good source of data? Have I established rapport? These processes are crucial to our analysis, but we may sometimes forget that our informants and potential informants also are observing, analyzing, and categorizing us. Until recently, researcher-researched interactions often were portrayed as “a one-way hierarchical process” dominated by the researcher (Oakley cited in Thapar-Björkert and Henry 2004). The discussion in many fields has now shifted as scholars realized that our informants, participants, and respondents also exert power in research interactions (Hoffmann 2007; Thapar-Björkert and Henry 2004). Our informants' choices about whether to talk with us, what to say or not to say,

¹ Attention to these issues has increased with the establishment of the Consortium for Qualitative Research Methods and the APSA Qualitative and Multi-Methods Research Section, but the field research and interview training offered tends to focus on logistical issues.

and what to do or not do shape our data. It is for this reason that some argue that we should think of our data as co-generated by the researcher and her informants.²

Social scientists have been discussing, debating, and researching how scholar-informant interactions affect our observations for quite a while. Experimentalists and psychologists talk about “reactivity,” interactions between the measurement instrument (researcher) and the subject/informant that affect the response (e.g. Campbell et al. 1963; Spector 1981). In the survey research literature, numerous studies have examined “interviewer effects.” Social desirability studies indicate that many respondents want to please their interviewers and tailor their responses to fit the interviewer’s perceived preference (Krysan 1998; Streb et al. 2008). Respondents’ answers often seem to depend upon interviewer and respondent characteristics such as gender, race, and class. For example, reported attitude about gender differ among women interviewed by women and women interviewed by men, and reported political beliefs and racial attitudes differ among African-Americans interviewed by African Americans and those interviewed by whites (Davis 1997; Huddy et al. 1997). Interviewer-respondent characteristics can also influence responses to unrelated questions; African-American respondents evinced less political knowledge when questioned by white interviewers than by African American interviewers (Davis and Silver 2003). Survey researchers tend to view respondent-interviewer effects as a threat to the validity of their inferences, and several techniques have been developed to assess and minimize the effects of these biases (Nederhof 1985).³ Most of these techniques cannot be readily utilized in less-structured interview and ethnographic research. One cannot

² Lee Ann Fujii introduced me to this framing.

³ Some researchers view these interviewer-respondent effects as a useful indicator of social conditions, Krysan and Couper (2003: 364), for example, comment “these same-race and cross-race exchanges in the form of a survey interview provide a valuable opportunity to view this ‘microcosm’ of the social world.” (Also see Schuman and Converse 1971 whom they cite).

randomize researcher characteristics across informants if there are only one or two field researchers or statistically measure and control for their effects. Nor is it self-evident that eliminating reactivity is always desirable; a response inflected by the researcher-informant interaction is not necessarily invalid.

Qualitative researchers in other disciplines also have been debating and discussing researcher-informant interactions for a long time, and researchers have developed several different approaches. In anthropology, and feminist studies, and sociology, few qualitative scholars aim to produce research uninfluenced by researcher-informant interactions. “Ethnography no longer claims to describe a reality accessible by anyone using the right methods, independent of the historical or cultural context of the act of describing” (Agar 1986:19, quoted in de Volo and Schatz 2004). Contemporary ethnographic norms called for scholars to attend to the ways in which their attributes and self presentation influence their findings. Texts often embed analyses of the research ethnographer’s attributes and self-presentation within the narrative, and the researcher’s experience may be a central concern in reflexive and autoethnographic texts. This approach is particularly useful for projects in which identity, social status, or constructs such as race, ethnicity or gender are central to the research question. For researchers like myself whose projects focus on other topics, the path ahead is less clear. Political scientists are likely to encounter more skepticism about the analytic value and generalizability of a reflexive approach.

Our embodiment, position/positionality, and self-presentation are important sources of data to our potential informants. The inferences our informants draw from this data influence researcher-informant interactions. While these factors overlap, embodiment, position, and self representation differ in the extent to which they are visible and subject to researcher

manipulation. Embodiment is used here to denote researchers' physical characteristics such as our height, size, and body type; eye, color, and skin color; hair texture; and physical disabilities or lack thereof.⁴ These characteristics are relatively visible and relatively immutable. One can wear a wig or colored contacts, but it is difficult to grow or shrink six inches, to gain or lose forty pounds, or to alter one's skin color. Informants may use these attributes to categorize us, perhaps by imputing our race, gender, and age, and also to infer or whether we are like or unlike them. Health researcher Laura Ellingson (2006: 306) commented, "In my research, my misshapen leg and knee brace both proved a point of connection with oncology patients and, at times, drew unwanted attention that affected my participant observation. I am marked physically as a patient, even when I want to be perceived as a researcher, demonstrating the slipperiness of categories."

Researchers' position and positionality also influence our interactions with informants. Position is used here to refer to objective characteristics such as one's level of education, ancestry, nationality, and institutional affiliations, and "positionality refers to placement within a set of relations and practices" (Anthias 2002). Researchers have limited control over their position and positionality. One cannot alter one's ancestry or quickly change one's level of education. One's positionality is determined by the context and other people's position as well as one's choices. However, researchers generally have greater control over disclosure of their position and some aspects of their positionality than their embodiment. Researchers may avoid

⁴ Much of the theoretical work on embodiment in the humanities and social sciences examines the discursive production of bodies, performance, and performativity (e.g. Weiss et al. 1999). However, some scholars have begun to look more closely at the material body and to analyze how their physical attributes affect their research (e.g. Bain and Nash 2006; Ellingson 2006; Seymour 2007). See Little and Leyshon (2003) and Longhurst (1997) for reviews of geographical scholarship on embodiment.

Embodiment is used in this paper to refer solely to physical attributes because I find it useful to distinguish between these characteristics and the meaning attributed to them. Researchers' self-presentations, informant perceptions, and researcher-informant interactions are part of the process through which embodiment gains meaning.

disclosure of information about their position and positionality which they perceive will hinder data collection. For example, Thapar-Björkert and Henry (2004) disclosed their nationalities during their field research in India, but both chose not to reveal to informants that they were involved with white men as they anticipated this would cause them to be classified as outsiders. These researchers also answered questions about their material assets and one shared photos of her family home. Both were uncertain how these disclosures affected their positionality; they note “we were often confused as to whether our respondents saw our class status as connected with our location as ‘first world’ women or whether we were imagined in the context of class relations within India” (Thapar-Björkert and Henry 2004: 369).

Our embodiment and position often interact with one another in complex ways, influencing our positionality in the field site. Henry (2007:74) recounts that her embodiment led research participants to question her western-ness and to focus on her ancestry rather than her nationality:

My brown skin colour prevented me from being seen as ‘quintessentially’ English or as ‘truly’ Canadian and my North American accent and deportment made it obvious that I was not a ‘native’ of India. My participants rarely saw me as straddling racialised national categories of citizenship and, during the course of research, I was repeatedly asked by participants about my origins as a way of trying to locate me as either foreign or native (but never both). On many occasions participants would ask about my origins, but then dismiss the categories or labels I had chosen to represent myself . . . many participants would ask about my parents and where they had lived in India.

Henry’s research focused on representations of Indian women and their understanding of their identities (Henry 2003). Although she sometimes found it difficult to negotiate informants probing questions, informants’ interest may well have facilitated her research. Henry’s liminal status, partially derived from her embodiment and position, facilitated movement between the roles of “socially acceptable incompetent” and “selective competent” many researchers adopt in their interactions with informants (Lofland 2006).

Researchers' self-presentation, as used here, is our performance. It comprises all that we put on display—our dress, comportment, speech, and behavior, *inter alia*. Unlike our embodiment and position, our self presentation is within our control and readily manipulated; it is constrained primarily by our imperfect self-awareness and limited repertoire. We can wear a suit and tie to one interview, a dress to another, and shorts and a t-shirt to a third, or utilize highly technical vocabulary in one interaction and slang in another. The question then arises, how should researchers present themselves so that we can accomplish our objective of collecting valid data that assists us answer our research question?

While the social science methods literature offers numerous sometimes contradictory recommendations on how researchers should present themselves, Harrington (2003) proposes we look to the social psychological literature. The literature on social identity and self presentation directly address how individuals perceive one another and thus may allow us to think more strategically about negotiating access. Both theories conceptualize identity “as the outcome of negotiated interaction” (p. 610). Social identity theory, as synthesized by Harrington, indicates that people are more willing to share information with those they “categorize as sharing a valued social identity ... or as enhancing that identity through their research” (Also see Tajfel 1982). Researchers are more likely to gain access if potential informants perceive them to be either similar or sympathetic and reputation-enhancing.

Self-presentation theory emphasizes the importance of one's audience in validating identity claims (Goffman 1959; Harrington 2003). However, a researcher presents herself, this theory emphasizes, her success depends on the response of her informants who may accept or reject her performance, or place it within unanticipated contexts. Henry (2007), like many other young female researchers, was often categorized as a daughter although she did not seek this

role. Laura Adams (1999) somewhat inadvertently became a “mascot researcher” in Uzbekistan, and believes that her gender, youth, and nationality influenced her placement in this role. In both cases, these categorizations sometimes facilitated and sometimes hindered research. Self presentation theory does not provide specific guidance on how to present oneself, but it provides a useful reminder that strategic self presentation cannot guarantee access. Researchers have a limited repertoire, and their embodiment, position, or other factors may prevent researchers from “present[ing] themselves in a light that will be acceptable to participants” (Harrington 2003:612). Self-presentation theory suggests that all researchers should assess the scope of possible self presentations, and the constraints their embodiment and position may impose. Knowing that our informants will categorize us, we can do our best to highlight those attributes likely to facilitate our access to information.

If we take these social psychological theories into account, then likely “insider” researchers should consider group norms in their self-presentation; people perceived to be similar along some dimension are evaluated according to group norms. For example, in her research among Cape Verdean communities De Andrade (2000), a Cape Verdean American, learned that using specific strategies increased the likelihood that community members would agree to be interviewed. She employed community-specific referents in her speech, situated her family within communal networks, and demonstrated her knowledge of history; the attributes informants deemed salient varied.⁵ De Andrade also observed that her research was inflected by her embodiment and physical self-presentation; her complexion and natural hair style signified “a more black or African interpretation of Cape Verdean identity.” Strategically manipulating her appearance was not an option in this instance as her hair style would elicit diverse responses,

⁵ One potential informant first questioned De Andrade and then required her to read a specific text before she would schedule an interview.

increasing her rapport with some informants and to reducing it with others, and she could not know which response it would evoke in advance. For likely “outsider” researchers, social identity theory indicates that informants’ assessment of whether the researcher poses a threat or could enhance their reputation will be the crucial determinant of access, and researcher’s self-presentation will inform those assessments. In some cases, informant perceptions that the researcher holds a privileged position may facilitate access; marginalized people may feel flattered by genuine interest. In other instances, individuals or groups who fear critical attention may perceive outside interest as a threat.

I have argued that embodiment, position, and self presentation affect informant perceptions and thus influence our interactions. And I have recommended that researchers consider their embodiment and position as they plan their field research and craft their self-presentation(s). As we do so, however, it is crucial to remember that informant categorizations, like our own perceptions, are not fixed but fluid. While De Andrade’s embodiment and position did not change during her research, she argues her insider status was negotiated throughout the research project, as were the meanings attached to her racial and ethnic identity. It is easy to move too quickly from considering our embodiment and position to making assumptions/judgments about the categories our informants will utilize. For example, in the United States, I tend to assume that my complexion, features, and hair texture will lead others to categorize me as a black person, an African-American. However, during informal interactions in Uganda where most people have darker complexions than mine, I was often hailed as a “muzungu,” a term that may mean white person or simply foreigner, or asked if I was biracial—a “half-caste” —or a colored South African. These speakers were clearly making inferences based

on my embodiment in each of these cases, but the categories varied. I would hesitate to draw any conclusion about the meanings attached to each label.

The broader point is that researchers rarely know precisely which attributes our respondents, informants, and participants will find salient or which categories our informants will employ, and we should hesitate to impose our categories (Robertson 2002).⁶ Social identity theory tells us that while people always categorize one another, almost any category will do. In the classic experiment, the relevant categories derived from subjects' preferences for one of two paintings briefly viewed (Tajfel et al. 1971). In practice, however, self presentation theories and other research indicates that the social and political context influence what is salient. Investigating the context in advance may help researchers to identify particular attributes to highlight in self presentation and to identify potential problems. The challenge is therefore to think carefully about how our embodiment and position may influence informant perceptions without becoming too attached to our expectations.

I confronted these issues of informant perceptions during my field research in Botswana and South Africa between 2004 to 2006. I will briefly describe the study before discussing how my embodiment, position, and self presentation influenced my research. The project focused on the relationship between nature tourism and local politics in southern Africa, specifically Botswana and South Africa. My initial research question was, whether and how does involvement in nature tourism affect local politics – the composition of the local elite, the issue agenda, the locus and substantive focus of conflict, the decision-making process, and the

⁶ Robertson (2002: 790-791) comments, “ Family history, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, and religion, among other distinctions, can be usefully woven into an ethnographic narrative, but only if they are not left self-evident as essentialized qualities . . . Their usefulness must be articulated and demonstrated because such distinctions are not fixed points but emerge and shift in the contiguous processes of doing and writing about fieldwork.”

distribution of resources? I sought to answer this question through comparative analysis of ten rural localities that were similar in important respects but varied with respect to their involvement in tourism and other explanatory factors. My research was conducted in four different areas that attract nature tourists, two in South Africa and two in Botswana. Unlike many of the projects referred to above, my research was not explicitly about embodiment or positionality or identity or race or gender or any of the “-isms.” I discuss racialized dispossession in analyzing the impact of conquest and colonization on contemporary local politics and property rights, but focus on structural rather than interpersonal factors. I did not plan to craft my findings in the form of a reflexive narrative or autoethnography.

As I planned and then conducted my fieldwork research, questions about my embodiment and positionality repeatedly arose. My principal concern was how these attributes would affect my ability to obtain interviews with different types of respondents and to garner meaningful, substantive responses to my questions. I anticipated that my embodiment and position would facilitate access to informants in certain circumstances while hindering it in others. At that time, as now, I was a short, youthful, light-skinned woman with long dreadlocks, an American native English speaker, and a graduate student at University of California. In South African categories I would probably be classified as colored or African, but it was not clear whether people would apply these categories to me. Some aspects of my position easy to ascertain as well. My accent is not hard to identify as American, or at least not southern African; my vocabulary and slang suggest I am highly educated, urban, and privileged; and my possession of a car showed that I was not poor. Additionally, my consent protocol required that I reveal my university affiliation.

My inferences about how these factors might affect my fieldwork in rural areas drew from my previous experiences in South Africa, and my readings in the ethnographic and

qualitative methods literature. I lived in Cape Town, South Africa in 1997 and 1998 and did exploratory research in one rural village and a large national park in the summer of 2002. At the time, I perceived South Africa to be a deeply racialized society and found that interracial interactions were uncommon outside of work and some elite or progressive settings. During my preliminary rural fieldwork, I perceived women to be more subject to traditional gender roles than in urban areas, and found that both age and ties to traditional leadership were linked with status. I was clearly seen as a youth, a woman, and an outsider, but I never not fully ascertained to what extent I was expected to follow local norms. I also learned during preliminary fieldwork that the national and provincial conservation agencies responsible for managing many nature tourism destinations had undergone a difficult transformation process. (South Africans use the term “transformation” to refer to the numerous processes through which public and private organizations have sought to dismantle racial and gender inequities). The South African National Parks agency historically had been dominated by white Afrikaners, but several black South Africans had been recruited and rapidly promoted since the 1990s; tensions between old and new park leaders were often apparent. These processes ensured that racial and gender categorizations would be salient. I had not spent time in Botswana prior to my dissertation fieldwork, but had been told that this country was more socially conservative but less racialized than South Africa.

To obtain the information I sought, I needed to observe both private and public interactions and to talk with a wide variety of actors: village elders, youth, and chiefs; farm workers and farm owners; tourism lodge managers, tour guides, professional hunters, and lower-level staff; conservation agency policy makers and managers; elected officials; and civil servants. I anticipated that my embodiment and position would interact with the local context to influence my access to potential informants in the following ways. Firstly, I thought that my

embodiment and apparent race would not impede access to black people in rural villages and farming areas but also would not facilitate access much either for two reasons. One, racial similarity is insufficient for acceptance in a country in which home language, ethnicity, and class are highly salient, and my native language, English, is the first language of a small minority. Two, my position as a wealthy foreigner would mark me as an outsider. I expected that my access to and rapport with these informants would depend upon my self-presentation and other factors.

In conservation agencies and other public organizations, I thought that my “race” would not impede access and that my affiliations with Berkeley and local universities would assist me to navigate formal research review processes. However, my race might raise questions about my sympathies I would have to negotiate carefully. Conservation staff might presume that I sided with black staff in internal agency struggles or that I was more sympathetic to nearby black communities seeking greater benefits from protected area tourism than to white or black parks officials attempting to balance community involvement, conservation, and revenue considerations in a challenging fiscal environment. “Social desirability bias” might therefore influence responses to questions about intra-agency dynamics or agency-community interactions, and I would have to do my best to present myself as a neutral researcher.

I expected that my embodiment would limit my access to white rural landowners, especially those who are Afrikaans. It is generally difficult to obtain access or freehold farms, which are controlled by landowners. White farm owners have been reluctant to grant access to any outsiders, including government officials, and it seemed likely that black people would encounter greater difficulty. There was no way that I would be perceived as a white person given my embodiment, and my limited Afrikaans language competence meant that I could not

present myself as an Afrikaans-speaking colored person, whom Afrikaans-speaking whites might prefer to an African. Additionally, occasional reports of violence perpetrated by farm owners and managers as well as against them suggested these farms might be dangerous spaces for any black person. These considerations influenced my case selection. Most southern African nature tourism occurs on public lands or freehold farms. I chose to focus most of my research on tourism destinations on public lands so that the project's success or failure would not depend primarily on gaining access to and consent from white rural landowners. This case selection decision could have biased my findings, although I believe it did not.⁷

Secondly, I thought that my youth, sex/gender, and stature would influence my access to informant. I believed that these physical and positional attributes would facilitate access to all types of informants because young short women are rarely perceived as threatening. At the same time, however, these attributes might hinder efforts to exert authority or display expertise. I thought that my gender would render my self-presentation particularly important as some potential informants would assess my conformance with local gender norms to which I planned only partially adhere. To conduct my research, I would most likely violate certain norms on occasion by traveling independently, questioning elders and community leaders, and sometimes requesting to observe discussions at which women are usually absent.

Finally, I thought that my position, particularly my nationality, would lead most informants to categorize me as an outsider. I thought that this categorization might prove helpful as I would have no clear vested interest in the particular outcomes of local struggles. To summarize, I expected that different types of potential informants would categorize me in

⁷ I believe that my research in two freehold farming localities was sufficient to identify the underlying political dynamics in freehold farming areas and to describe the distribution of nature tourism benefits and costs in these areas.

various ways based on my embodiment and position. I thought these categorizations would influence, but not determine, my access to informants.

Concerns about informants' perceptions shaped my self-presentation. As I interacted with gatekeepers and potential informants, I sought to present myself in a manner that would facilitate access without compromising my needs and ethics. In practice, this meant that while I always tried to display sympathy for and interest in my informants' perspective, I varied other aspects of my self presentation by informant group and occasionally by individual. I tried to demonstrate industry-specific knowledge in interactions with tourism, hunting, and conservation people because I perceived these informants to be both time constrained and reluctant to waste their time speaking to the uninformed. In interactions with community elders, on the other hand, I refrained from showing too much expertise as many elders appeared to enjoy educating a naïve outsider about local history and politics. Because I dressed in accordance with local norms, I wore business attire in cities and at tourism business conferences, outdoorsy clothing in the nature reserves and on freehold farms, and wore modest clothing in the villages.

My choices about self presentation involved behavior outside the formal research setting as well as within it. Most of my research was conducted in small, tightly networked communities in which most people knew one another -- small villages, farming areas, and game reserves--and I was highly visible. I chose to refrain from going to the bars and shebeens in the villages and farming areas or attending church because I sought to avoid being categorized either as an immodest, irresponsible drinker or a moralistic Zion Christian Church adherent, Lutheran, or Methodist. I felt that some potential informants would judge me if I engaged in public drinking, and also sought to avoid romantic or sexual advances from potential informants. These choices

were influenced by my gender; I think that public drinking would have had fewer implications for a male researcher.

I also made some choices that limited my participation in community life and thus lessened my access to information. In every locality but one, I stayed by myself in a tent or inside park guest lodging rather than living with a local family. This decision allowed me some time in which I was not on display and allowed me to avoid having to choose in which of the three villages closest to one tourism destination I would stay, but also reinforced my status as an outsider likely to be inclined toward conservationists.⁸ This concern was particularly salient in one freehold farming research site, Mapungubwe, where I stayed with other researchers and students at Rhodesdrift, an old farmhouse inside the national park. In this instance, my residence was a very salient aspect of my positionality. The national parks agency and the DeBeers Corporation have been trying to expand the conservation estate in the Mapungubwe region. Although both organizations have relied upon a voluntary approach, purchasing land from willing owners or persuading farmers to allow some of their land to be managed as part of Mapungubwe National Park, some farmers fear that the state will use its powers of expropriation to force them out. Most potential informants in the Mapungubwe area asked me where I was staying, and some farmers questioned me about my relationship to the park agency before agreeing to share their perspective. I chose to remain at Rhodesdrift because I did not have a feasible alternative, the farmhouse was conveniently situated outside the main area of the park close to a farmworker settlement and a few working farms, and it facilitated informal interactions with some conservation staff and residents.

⁸ In one village, I stayed with two older women who were not deeply involved in local politics and were comfortable having me prepare my own food. I will try to identify similar lodging possibilities in future research in rural villages.

After I began my research, my interactions provided information about the validity of these expectations and raised new issues I had not anticipated. In the Mapungubwe research site, more so than any of the others, I believe that my race (embodiment), my position, and informants' occupation interacted to determine my access. My informants in this site included white Afrikaans farmers, white English farmers, black South African and Zimbabwean farmworkers, black and white conservation managers and staff, white tourism and hunting business owners of varied nationalities and ethnicities, among others. I had anticipated that it would be particularly difficult to obtain access to white farmers due to my embodiment, and I indeed found it was more difficult to arrange interviews with white Afrikaans-speaking landowners, and to obtain more than cursory responses from these potential informants. The question of access, of course, is not simply whether an individual will agree to an interview or not or permit a meeting to be observed or not, but whether the informant will participate fully in the process, sharing his or her attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge rather than hiding them, speaking honestly, and, ideally, going beyond the precise limits of the questions to speak to their underlying intent. It was this limitation on my access that was most evident in my interactions with Afrikaans landowners. I suspect that most landowners learned of my presence through local social networks before I first made contact, and were aware of my race and residence at Mapungubwe National Park.⁹ It is likely that unresponsive farmers inferred that I was unlikely to be sympathetic to their plight, and it is probable that some were uninterested in talking to a black person. I discussed these perceptions with a few white residents and landowners who confirmed my inferences and told me of the racist language occasionally employed in whites-

⁹ Although the Mapungubwe region is sparsely populated, most white residents appeared to know one another, and the local farmers clubhouse served as a social focal point. Shortly after my initial arrival, I observed two meetings, and met several landowner residents, so news of my presence could have spread quickly.

only settings. In contrast, I found that most other potential informants were willing to speak with me. I found that Mapungubwe-area black farm and tourism workers were very willing to speak with me, as long as we made sure their employers did not observe our interaction. I believe my access was facilitated by my research assistant, an individual whom most black residents respected (see discussion below). And Mapungubwe conservationists, tourism business owners, and hunting reserve managers often were eager to share their perspective. These individuals seemed to perceive me as sympathetic, and occasionally solicited my advice as a social scientist.

In the three other research sites-- the Okavango Delta in Botswana, Northern Tuli Game Reserve in Botswana, and Madikwe Game Reserve in South Africa, my embodiment had little apparent affect on my access. Although I occasionally discussed racial categorizations and perceptions and informal conversations with residents, my race appeared to have little effect on whether potential informants agreed to speak with me or what they said.¹⁰ My position and positionality, however, was salient in every research site. I found that most, but not all, business owners were reluctant to share detailed information about their operations. This is not surprising. However, I found that several other Madikwe Game Reserve scholars had leveraged greater access to this type of data by utilizing their positions as parks agency employees or tourism lodge shareholders.¹¹ I suspect that my access would have been enhanced by such a position, although my positionality would likely have influenced responses to sensitive questions. I am confident that the response rate to my survey of these businesses was enhanced by the reserve manager's e-

¹⁰ I found that young female informants tended to be less expository than other respondents but do not believe this was due to my embodiment or position. I suspect this tendency reflected the interaction between local norms—women should defer to men and to elders—and young women's choices—highly articulate young women are more likely to leave their communities for opportunities elsewhere, but I may be mistaken.

¹¹ Theses and publications by Madikwe insider scholars were useful sources of data (Massyn and Swan 2002; Mosidi 1996; Relly 2004; Sentle 2000).

mail requesting that each lodge participate. My access to informants and other data was particularly limited in Northern Tuli Game Reserve, a private nature tourism destination in Botswana that has sometimes welcomed ecological and archaeological researchers but prefers not to have its internal dynamics examined. Northern Tuli landownership data is not published and the landowners association was unwilling to share its membership list which made it difficult to identify and contact potential informants. Although I was able to secure some interviews, an insider account of this reserve became a crucial source of information (Steyn 2004).¹²

My position as a researcher appeared to be the most salient attribute for many potential informants in rural villages. Several informants told me of previous interactions with researchers, and their experiences clearly influenced their interactions with me. A few assumed that I would have the same questions other researchers had asked and came prepared to answer those questions so I had to explain that my project was different. Most of my South African informants reported positive experiences with researchers, but several Botswana informants reported negative experiences, and a few individuals indicated that they would no longer speak with any researcher. The primary complaint was that the researchers had failed to communicate their findings. I had encountered similar issues during my 2002 preliminary fieldwork and had already planned to present my preliminary findings to informants by making presentations in communities and distributing a preliminary report to local organizations before exiting the field. I addressed this issue by describing how I would share my findings in my presentations at community meetings and introductory interactions with potential informants, and then providing informants with audio CDs of their interviews as quickly as possible.

¹² In his memoir, this long-term property owner disclosed much of the information the Association refused to share; he identified the owners of particular properties, traced shift in land ownership, and described how each parcel was used, *inter alia*.

The aspects of my self-presentation discussed so far were fully within my control, but others were not. Informants judge researchers by their associates as well as by their own behavior. In order to conduct my research, I had to work through multiple gatekeepers at various levels from the national government of Botswana, which issues research permits, to national and provincial conservation agencies such as the North West Parks and Tourism Board, to local chiefs and village trust boards. Each of these gatekeepers received information about my research prior to other potential informants, and in several cases, these gatekeepers were responsible for the initial framing of my project to local conservation staff and village residents, and therefore influenced my positionality. Some informants had strong, often negative, feelings about particular gatekeepers. I did my best to neutralize these perceptions by introducing myself and my project at community meetings and tourism meetings; emphasizing that my project was for a degree, not a government agency or local organization; promising to share my findings with interested residents; and conducting my work independently of these gatekeepers.

My research assistants also affected informant perceptions and interactions of me. In almost every research site, I worked with one or more assistants who arranged interviews, provided interpretation when necessary, and took notes on local meetings.¹³ Informants' perceptions of my assistants were particularly salient because I chose to work with local research assistants, people from my research sites.¹⁴ I identified assistants by asking local people to

¹³ Setswana is the dominant language in most of my research sites, but English, TshiVenda, TsiTsonga, Khwe, SiYei, Ts'exa and Afrikaans are also spoken. I have very limited competence in SeTswana, TsiTsonga, and Afrikaans, and do not speak the other languages at all. English is widely spoken and the majority of my interviews were conducted in English. However, I relied upon my research assistants for interpretation when necessary, and then had my urban interview transcribers check their interpretations.

¹⁴ My choice to work with local assistants was motivated primarily by my desire to ensure that my research sites garnered at least a little material benefit from my research, secondarily by the perception that the research benefits of working with a local who understood the setting rather

identify skilled, responsible people who would respect confidentiality. I realized quickly that my research assistants' attributes strongly influenced my access to informants and their responses. I am certain that some informants spoke with me, and some refused to speak with me because of my assistants.

In most cases, I believe it was respondents' position and role within the community, rather than their embodiment that mattered most. My assistants were uniformly "black," although of varied complexions and sizes, and close to me in age (between their late 20s and early 30s); about half were female and half male. Each of my assistants had a particular position and positionality in his or her home locality and region, a specific history in each place, and a particular self presentation. Most were well respected, relatively well educated, underemployed youth who participated in at least one local organization. I sought to identify a neutrally positioned local assistant in each site, but did not always succeed. Observing each research assistant and her or his interactions with informants and other community members became part of my data collection process. To assess how working with each research assistant affected my research, I gathered information about each assistants' involvement in local affairs, observed their behavior, and observed others' reaction to them. I also conducted at least one formal interview with almost every assistant, and conducted several sensitive interviews without an assistant present. Over time, I learned that a few assistants were implicated in some of the matters I sought to study. I looked out for RA-produced bias and RA-presence induced bias, but

than more technically skilled urban assistant were greater than the costs. For example, the research assistants' continued presence in each locality allowed me to track events over time as I moved between research sites. It would have been difficult to persuade an urban assistant to spend extended periods in most of these localities, and in fact several assistants relocated to urban areas after my field research was complete.

could not always avoid it. I probably would choose to work with local assistants on similar projects in the future, but would devote more time to appraising potential assistants.

While preparing for my research, then, and while in the field, I attended to informant perceptions; made inferences about the influence of my embodiment, positionality, and self presentation; and negotiated these issues as best I could. In some instances, I think that the complex interactions between my attributes, my informant attributes, and sometimes my assistant's attributes created rich, interesting, and valid data. My questions, my embodiment, and my position sometimes prompted informants to consider ordinary events and processes more closely, while the presence of a local assistant provided a check on their accounts. Researcher-research assistant- informant interactions influenced, but did not distort my data. In other interactions, however, my attributes, inept self-presentation, or my assistants' perceived leanings led informants to refuse interviews, to keep silent or evade a question, or to respond disingenuously. In these instances, it is appropriate to conclude that interviewer effects biased my data.

So what to make of all of this? I have argued throughout this paper that informants' perceptions of researchers influence all of the data we garner through interpersonal interactions. Whether potential informants agree to share information, what they say, or don't say, and how they say it is shaped by our attributes and the inferences our informants draw from these attributes. I have focused on three factors that influence informant perceptions: our embodiment (physical characteristics), our position and positionality, and our self presentation (our performance). My research experiences and those presented in other reflexive accounts, suggest that these factors influence our access, our research interactions, and our data, in complex ways. This account draws from my specific embodied, positioned experiences in particular contexts.

The paper is based on my recollection and regrettably less than systematically recorded field observations of my interactions with informants and research assistants.

In closing, I want to suggest a few strategies for incorporating potential researcher-informant interaction effects into our research. First, think about the question, types of data you seek to collect, and the characteristics of potential informants as you plan your research. This will help you to anticipate which of your attributes are most likely to influence informant responses, to identify particular attributes to highlight in self presentation and to identify potential problems. Some characteristics may be highly salient in certain contexts or for particular research questions and largely irrelevant in others. Think about how you are likely to be categorized, and what opportunities and constraints that might create. As you think about your embodiment and position, your potential informants' attributes, and your positionality with respect to those informants, try not to become too attached to your expectations so that you can observe interactions and adjust your self-presentation necessary in the field.

Second, your approach to researcher-informant interactions should be consistent with your research question and epistemology. If you believe that data emerge from interpersonal interactions, or you are interested in the meanings informants attach to some phenomena, then a reflexive approach to informant perceptions may be appropriate. You might embed analysis of your attributes and self-presentation within the narrative. If you are wedded to the objective and factual, then it may be appropriate to treat informant perceptions as a potential source of bias. Design your research so that you can triangulate.

This was the strategy I adopted. I looked out for biases arising from the interaction between my traits and those of potential informants, observed my interactions and noted which data appeared particularly prone to be influenced by my attributes. In addition to obtaining as

many perspectives as I could on events and matters of interest by interviewing differently positioned actors, I collected other types of data not as subject to these informant interaction affects. I observed local meetings and collected minutes, reviewed documents such as organizational records, project materials, and public records, and conducted a small standardized survey focused on factual information. These different sources of data sometimes allowed me to fill in gaps in informant accounts of particular events, to confirm or disconfirm certain claims made by interested informants, or, more often, to become clearer on what was at stake on some issue about which informants differed or were reluctant to address. Non-informant data also allowed me to address some of the questions my interviews left unanswered.¹⁵ My approach to researcher-(research assistant)-informant interactions reflects the empirical bent of my research project. My objective was to describe, analyze, and explain political and economic processes and outcomes. A researcher undertaking an interpretive project might rightly have focused more attention on eliciting different informants' perspectives than confirming or disconfirming their accounts.

A common approach to researcher-informant interactions, which I do not recommend, is to ignore them. You can act as if your embodiment, position/positionality, and self presentation had no impact on your data. I hope that this paper has demonstrated the importance of attending to researcher and informant attributes and interactions. Attending to researcher-informant interactions makes our analysis more rigorous, and our scholarship would benefit from greater attention to these aspects of research praxis.

¹⁵ This was particularly the case in the Mapungubwe and Northern Tuli where I had less interview data. Primary documents, media reports, and other scholarly accounts helped me to understand the changing sociopolitical context that landowners and farm dwellers confronted.

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