Standing Out and Blending In: Contact-Based Research, Ethics, and Positionality

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ABSTRACT This article explores the ethical difficulties that arise because of the interaction between fieldwork practitioners and their sites, in terms of the positionality of the researcher. What are the ethics of blending in or of standing out? This question stems from my experience of 12 months of fieldwork in South Africa in two distinct locales and among two different populations, one in which I could "pass" and another in which I was marked as various degrees of "outsider." Drawing on this fieldwork, as well as an overview of the literature in political science on positionality, I argue that our discipline—because of the way it shapes interactions and research outcomes—must take positionality seriously in ethical training and practice.

Recent work on research ethics in political science has broadened the conversation about ethics training and consciousness beyond the procedural ethics of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process (Fujii 2012; Michelson 2016). This new direction was necessary because the concepts of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice—which are central to IRB protocols—are important but insufficient in ensuring ethical conduct in much social science research (Mackenzie, McDowell, and Pittaway 2007).

When a researcher is significantly involved in data collection through interaction with participants,[1] the ethical considerations involved are ongoing during research implementation and, therefore, are outside of the scope of the IRB. As such, scholars such as Tracy (2012) have called for "situational and relational ethics" and Guillemin and Gillam (2004) developed the idea of "ethical reflexivity," both of which are navigated by individual researchers in the process of conducting research. I argue that situational ethics should be conditioned also by the identity, or positionality, of those conducting research; identities to which the researcher ascribes as well as those that are assigned by their interlocutors in contact-based research. Positionality must be considered as part of the ethical landscape of contact-based research because the interactions on which such research is based are imbued with questions of how researchers present themselves and how they are perceived by their interlocutors. The identities of researchers, observed or assumed by their interlocutors, shape the types of situational ethical dilemmas that they must navigate.

Although researchers present themselves in their professional capacity, both they and their interlocutors understand their interactions to be raced and gendered, as well as imbued with dynamics of class and other inequalities. Observable or inferred identities—those that can be seen or those that are (rightly or wrongly) assumed by interlocutors—can create ethical sticking points due to power dynamics, access, trauma, or threat (Fujii 2017).[2] For example, the ethics of a researcher who identifies and/or is understood as a foreign man conducting research on wartime atrocities including sexual violence are distinct from those of an in-group woman. However, subtler issues of researcher positionality also arise in the course of conducting research in the differences between interviewing people from distinct identity groups.

This article argues in favor of moving the discussion of ethics in political science toward positionality as central to the development and implementation of what I call contact-based research—that is, research that involves interactions between researchers and participants in the form of surveys, participant observation, or ethnography. To do so, I first examine the ways in which political science and other disciplines consider positionality and works that specifically interrogate the ideas of "insiders" and "outsiders." I then examine examples from my own contact-based research during the course of more than a year in South Africa—among populations in which I could blend in and those in which I immediately stood out—to highlight the ways in which ethical dilemmas often are conditioned by the identity of the implementing researcher. To conclude, I make two central recommendations: (1) that ethical training critically interrogate the idea of researcher neutrality in contact-based research; and (2) that researchers build positionality into their own conception of ethical conduct in advance of project implementation.

POSITIONALITY AND RESEARCH

The discussion of positionality in research is somewhat rare in political science (Kapiszewski, Maclean, and Read 2015, 147).

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When it does happen, the conversations often are in the context of a hybrid discussion of fieldwork practicalities and outcomes, such as navigating positionality in creating relationships (Aldrich 2009; Yanow 2009); discussing the practicalities of life in field sites (Ortbals and Rincker 2009; Schwedler 2006); and examining the ways that the identities (perceived, revealed, or misperceived) of researchers affect the data-collection process (Chavez 2008; Townsend-Bell 2009). Although political scientists have long discussed how, for example, case selection affects research outcomes, more recent discussions of identity and research have turned to the idea that who we are may indeed affect the fieldwork we do and the answers we obtain in both large-N (Adida et al. 2016) and small-N (Fujii 2013; Gill and Maclean 2002; Maclean 2013) research.

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Discussions of positionality often are framed in terms of insider–outsider dynamics and the extent to which a researcher's identities became part of the research process. Some researchers clearly position themselves, and are positioned by their interlocutors, as "outsiders" to the communities that they study (Blee 2003; Lin 2002; Scoggins 2014; Scott 2008; Wedeen 2008). In his path-breaking ethnography of reindeer herders in Siberia, Vitebsky (2006, 42) recounted his first trip to Yakutsk: "I appeared to be invisible…a visitor from another world."[3] Others, by contrast, situate themselves clearly as insiders and speak to the avenues opened up by their common identities but also to the ways that it constrains their work (Brown 2012; Chavez 2008). The middle ground between insider and outsider status occasionally is charted in political science, as in Cramer's (2016, 11, 39–40) discussion of her Wisconsin-based identity in *The Politics of Resentment.* She chronicles her own connections with the state and also the ways in which her research participants perceived her as "outside" because she is affiliated with the University of Wisconsin and lives in a metropolitan area.

POSITIONALITY AS INTERSUBJECTIVE AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The status of "insider" versus "outsider" is about the self-positioning of researchers as well as the identities assigned to them by their interlocutors. Contact-based research always involves some curation of self-presentation by researchers because it is a professional activity, often spatially removed from daily life. Because of professional constraints (e.g., IRB consent protocols), researchers often present themselves to potential interlocutors with credentials such as business cards, university affiliation, or brief biographical data. But when navigating the complexities of contact-based research, what are the ethical dilemmas posed by being able to "pass" as part of the population that the researcher has set out to study versus standing out? How does moving through the research space with the potential for blending in ethically differ from being labeled by observable characteristics as an outsider?

Blee (2003, 11) noted that the racial background that she shared with her interlocutors (i.e., women in racist hate groups) was a reason that she was allowed access to spaces, but she also was upfront with her participants at the outset, stating: "I made it clear that I did not share the racial convictions of these groups. I explicitly said that my views were quite opposed to theirs, that they should not hope to convert me to their views." She was identified as a potential ingroup member; therefore, she positioned herself as ideologically outside from the outset. However, this specific research project entailed interviewing explicitly racist group members about their activities. Much research with potential insider–outsider dynamics is not so clearly ethically delimited.

Anthropologist Atreyee Sen (2007, 16) discussed the complexities of insider–outsider dynamics in a less ethically clear-cut project and the ways in which her hybrid status of being both insider and outsider shaped her research experience in her ethnography of women activists in Shiv Sena, a conservative Hindu Nationalist organization:

> The women introduced me to a world they thought was theirs and over which they had the right to rule. But they only caught glimpses of my world; they thought they knew everything about it anyway…. I watched Sena women corporators attack and strip two Muslim women corporators in the House of Parliament, and then, having eaten ice cream with Sena women on the beach, went home and helped during dinner, played with Kamla's [a central interlocutor and Shiv Sena activist] grandson, told her son how to manage his dishonest accounts, and at the end of the day curled up in bed to write my notes. Now I loved them, now I hated them. Now I was an insider, now an outsider, but always an observer. I suffered several paradoxes and grave ethical dilemmas, which continue to haunt my writing. I felt my work came at a price: that of betraying the victims of violence with whom it is far easier to sympathize.

Unlike Blee, Sen was not specifically seeking out individuals to interact with on the basis of morally reprehensible behavior. Yet, she found herself interacting with people who do engage the same and observing some of this behavior firsthand.

In my own research in South Africa, I conducted work similar to Sen, in the sense that I often was interviewing people with deeply held prejudices but was not specifically defining these populations for scrutiny and with a degree of "insider" privilege. As a white woman conducting research in part in white Afrikaans communities with a conversational grasp of the language, I often was mistaken for being Afrikaans myself. The access provided by these observable similarities (e.g., skin tone) with potential research subjects in primarily white spaces allowed me to move around without flagging my researcher status; however, I often was confronted with ethical difficulties on the basis of my "passing." Being superficially undetected shaped interactions in ways that ranged from humorous—people jokingly denying that I could be a foreigner when I identified myself as such—to unsettling—as when an older man angrily confronted me about "losing my heritage" when I made a grammatical mistake in Afrikaans in public. I acquired the nickname "*die Amerikaner wat lyk soos 'n*

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Afrikanermeisie/the American who looks like an Afrikaner girl."[4] My public presentation, especially if I did not speak, allowed me to inhabit (public) spaces without drawing attention, as I often did during my research trip: attending church services, arts festivals, and university events in Afrikaans. This assignment of identity was not only among Afrikaans people; members of other populations (e.g., Zulu speakers and Sotho speakers) in and around my research sites also positioned me similarly. This was in part because of my facility in isiZulu, which they assumed was a result of a rural Afrikaans upbringing as a farmer's daughter.

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The reverse was true in my second field site, where I primarily was seeking to interview Zulu speakers in Durban, who almost entirely identify as Black and African. Although my Zulu language skills were more advanced and presented fewer mechanical difficulties in translation, my appearance signaled immediate outsider status in many of the spaces that I inhabited. Casual interactions were marked by the assumption of my foreignness, as when a newspaper vendor refused to sell me a newspaper in isiZulu. Despite my requesting to buy it in isiZulu and showing the vendor my money, he insisted that I could not read it. When I later told a Zulu-speaking friend about the interaction, I was met with raucous laughter, and my friend told me, "You cannot go around looking like you do and then speak like that. You broke that man's brain!" Despite my official training and the fact that my conversational isiZulu was far superior to my Afrikaans, I was incomprehensible to this newspaper vendor—and an amusement to my friends—when I tried to work within that social space without appropriate introduction.

The quotidian nature of the insider–outsider dynamics raised ethical difficulties—inherent in much field-based research—about the nature of data, the idea of recording social dynamics, and what constitutes public behaviors (Fujii 2014). However, these questions are compounded because, whereas much contact-based research involves seeking out candid revelations, the position of "passing" brings in the implied or explicit sense that researchers are in accord with their research participants. The balance of being a person who engages in non-research-based socializing in the course of fieldwork versus being a recorder of social and political life is an ethical tightrope. I went to after-work hours where I was a known researcher and where racist jokes or allusions to the idea of an "inevitable race war" were made. When I went to have a haircut, there was a brief interlude of small talk largely about what I had seen in the country. The white stylist then launched into a tirade about how "the Blacks" did not value environmental conservation because they could not "think about delaying gratification," which I "must understand" because I came from a place that was also diverse. Should these comments inform my research? During the course of interviews with white participants, there often were interjections about how pleasant it was for my research participants to let their guard down and speak honestly because I must know from where they were coming. Was this data? When I was assumed to be in accord with racist sentiments, was it my responsibility to record or to contradict? Admittedly, in the moment, I rarely engaged in direct confrontation—even in the face of the most strident prejudices—and, like Sen, I am haunted by those choices.

The converse was true in primarily Black spaces, where I spent the second half of my fieldwork speaking to Zulu-speaking South Africans and where my outsider status was flagged quickly. In this phase of my research, I had to work harder to build rapport, and the divulging of information was seemingly more intentional. There were moments of tension, as when a research participant told me that she found conversing with white people uncomfortable, even 20 years into multiracial democracy, and quietly added "like now." This discomfort required ethical navigation and, in the moment, I simply apologized.

Such ethical conundrums also were inherent in the interview space, a place more closely regulated by bureaucratic ethical considerations. Even after informed-consent sheets had been distributed and credentials offered, there were significant differences between interviewing people who perceived me to be an "insider" versus an "outsider," primarily on the basis of race. Within the interview space, my positionality as a white woman opened up certain opportunities but foreclosed others.[5] In primarily white, Afrikaans-speaking interviews, I found that I often was assumed to be in agreement with the participants and that I was taken into their sense of "we" with relative ease, in both English and Afrikaans interactions. Interjections such as "oh, you understand" are notated with some frequency in my interview transcripts of these interactions. Even when I had clearly identified myself as a foreign researcher and was actively taking notes, there was a sense in which I still had "passing" privileges. I was allowed into spaces and taken into confidences, like both Blee and Sen, that were available in part because of my racial identity. Conversely, many Black participants in interviews and in social

I believe we can allow for the possibility that either direct confrontation in the vein of Blee or "haunting" as described by Sen, as well as other points along the spectrum, can be viable ethical practices in the face of assumed solidarities. However, central to this argument is the idea that any such strategy must be considered before research implementation, rather than implemented ad hoc*, in order to conduct ethically consistent work.*

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interactions were more circumspect, occasionally openly expressing discomfort, as described previously. Was this also data? Was it my responsibility to apologize for the discomfort or to analyze it? How would my project have turned out differently had it been conducted by someone else?

I do not believe that I have firm answers to these questions, even several years after my data-collection efforts for that project concluded and it has been published as a book (Holmes 2020). Ultimately, little text from my fieldnotes appears in the final manuscript but they remain as background, informing my conclusions. I wish, however, that I would have had the tools to think critically about these issues before data collection for my project began.

TOWARD A POSITIONAL ETHICS

My assertions here are twofold. First, ethics training should include critical examination—and possible abandonment—of the idea of researcher neutrality in contact-based research. As a discipline, political science must engage with the idea of positionality but also move beyond the idea that such discussions are a matter of fieldwork practicalities. Positionality is an intersubjective process and one over which any individual researcher has a limited amount of control. Learning from anthropologists such as Sen, Vitebsky, and others as well as political scientists such as Wedeen, Lin, and Cramer can inform the discussion of how contact-based research is a fundamentally interpersonal enterprise. This new emphasis does not abandon the idea that central ethical principles, including protection of vulnerable populations and maintaining confidentiality, but rather seeks to examine the ways that even core ethical practices are inflected by the positionality of the researcher.

Second, in advance of contact-based research projects, researchers should reflect on how their self-presentation and potential assumed identities shape their research ethics strategies and tailor them accordingly. Identifying oneself in the research setting but also being identified by others shapes the ethical and data landscapes that a researcher navigates, as well as the types of approaches that they can take to pursue substantively ethical research. In both standing out and blending in, researchers should be reflective on how their presence and their identities (both lived and perceived) shape considerations of consent, access, trauma, and harm in their interactions with research participants. These considerations are true of all contact-based work, whether in the form of surveys, participant observation, or ethnography. There is not, of course, a single strategy that can work for all projects. I believe we can allow for the possibility that either direct confrontation in the vein of Blee or "haunting" as described by Sen, as well as other points along the spectrum, can be viable ethical practices in the face of assumed solidarities. However, central to this argument is the idea that any such strategy must be considered before research implementation, rather than implemented *ad hoc*, in order to conduct ethically consistent work. Not all eventualities can be planned for and not all ethical conundrums can be resolved in the implementation of contact-based research. However, I argue that in making positionality central to our discussions of ethics, we are centering the real demands of a thorough ethical sensibility in contact-based research. ■

NOTES

1. This definition of fieldwork is based on Jamal (2020).
2. For example, a fellow researcher in Durban who identified herself as Puerto Rican often was assumed by her interlocutors to be white or Colored (in the South African sense). In this case, an observable trait (i.e., skin tone) was inferred into a racial grouping to which she did not subscribe.
3. Later in the book, after Vitebsky developed relationships with the communities, he brings his family and describes his own children as being "from another world," worrying about "bringing together people from two separate parts of one's life" (2006, 332, 331).
4. This label was not related to my language skills or ability to blend in but specifically to my appearance.
5. For interesting discussions of how researcher affiliations can open some opportunities and foreclose others, see Shehata (2015) and Zirakzadeh (2009).

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