On Sensitivity and Secrecy: How Foreign Researchers and their Local Contacts in Myanmar Deal with Risk under Authoritarian Rule

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Toward the end of my first year as a PhD student, I partici-pated in a graduate conference on research ethics and dilem-mas that anthropologists encounter in the field. My intended field research, covering aspects of human rights, democrati-zation, and social activism in Myanmar, had yet to take place.[1] There was limited published academic guidance on how to conduct such research, and the few available ethnographic studies on politics and human rights in Myanmar came under such gloomy titles as "living silence" (Fink 2009) and "the politics of fear" (Skidmore 2004). I decided to use the confer-ence as an opportunity to present some of the difficulties I thought I might experience in the field. While most of the topics raised during the conference led to interesting debates on how ethical dilemmas had been or could have been tackled, my presentation resulted in very critical remarks, and even the accusation that I was being unethical. It was suggested that my intended research would put local people in danger,

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1 I use Myanmar to speak about the current situation, Burma to speak about the pre-1989 era, and Burmese to refer to the population and the official language, while acknowledging that none of these terms are uncontested.

and that I should conduct my research with Burmese people in a neighboring country instead. These responses were a reminder of some important considerations one needs to take into account when doing research in "difficult situations" (Sriram et al. 2009): the unequal power relationship between the foreign researcher and those living on the ground, and the responsibilities this brings about to find an acceptable trade-off between the potential risks and benefits of conducting research.

The concerns expressed by this particular audience were understandable in light of the international association of Myanmar with danger and repression at the start of my research. Yet while we must certainly think through and take responsibility for the consequences of our research activities, we should not automatically assume that a potentially vulnerable population would prefer to be ignored. Sriram (2009: 58) discusses the dilemma between protecting local participants and giving them a platform:

> Because local interlocutors are likely to be less mobile than internationals, they may need extra protection. However, such interlocutors should not be treated paternalistically — most are well aware of the risks they face in their daily work as politicians, human rights advocates, and civil society leaders, or for their status as members of the opposition, ex-combatants, and so on. They are also aware of any risks in voicing their opinions, particularly opposition to a local elite or status quo, and choose to do so precisely because they want to draw attention to a situation they perceive as unjust.

Likewise, I argue that decisions about acceptable levels of risk should be made in consultation with one's prospective participants, rather than in their absence. As local research participants are often more at risk than foreign visitors, the researcher should take ultimate responsibility for the safe gathering, treatment, and reporting of data. Yet the researcher also carries a different type of responsibility, if one takes into account what Gallaher (2009: 140) refers to as "the power of

representation": researchers' ability "to shape how research subjects are presented and as a result policies that address their needs and concerns" (Gallaher 2009: 133). I therefore argue that ignoring large sections of a population without a detailed analysis of the risks and possibilities denies them the opportunity to take part in such debates.

This article discusses the challenges of working in risky environments that are unfamiliar to many Western researchers. Drawing on my personal experiences, I argue for a case-by-case assessment based on consultation with a variety of people with experience in and an understanding of local circumstances. Local contacts and other experts can provide guidance to researchers, and can help them decide how to proceed. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that the researcher remains ultimately responsible for the consequences of field research. This entails both responsibility for one's actions in the field, and accountability for the potentially negative consequences of one's research activities and publications. Naturally, the emphasis should be on preventive action, as it is impossible for a foreigner to undo negative consequences for contacts on the ground such as intimidation, detention, or torture. In order to prevent unwanted consequences for research participants, the researcher might want to err on the side of caution, even when locals are willing to take significant risks. Before I left for the field, I was frequently reminded of a student at our university whose reliance on the guidance of his contacts in another Asian country had resulted in the confiscation of data containing details on local dissidents.[2] In the interests of my research participants, my university and myself, it was important to prevent such incidents in any way possible.

In the remainder of this article, I outline the potential risks to local people as well as foreign visitors in Myanmar, and describe how my local contacts and I dealt with these risks

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2 I have been asked to refrain from identifying the student or country in which the incident took place.

and sensitivities. I will also describe the secrecy I sometimes encountered, which seemed to serve the dual function of minimizing the risk of government repercussion on the one hand, and impression management in relation to an international audience on the other hand. I draw from experiences and conversations held in Yangon, as well as at several locations in Thailand, where I spoke with Burmese students and activists of a variety of ethnic and geographical backgrounds. My data mainly cover the period from 2010 to 2011, with occasional reference to later visits. A new dimension was added when it became clear that the situation of military dictatorship that had existed for 50 years is undergoing significant change. This article therefore is intended both as a contribution to the discussion on research ethics in practice, and as an observation of the changing context in Myanmar.

Balancing the Risks and Benefits of Research

Over the past few decades, formal codes of ethics and institutional review boards have emerged to regulate research conducted with persons in order to protect them from exploitation by the researcher. These in turn have been criticized for their preoccupation with the legal liabilities of the university and their lack of practical applicability, especially in potentially hazardous circumstances. Review boards are inclined to respond negatively to "risky research" or research in unfamiliar environments, especially when they lack detailed information (Ditton and Lehane 2011; King 2009: 15). Such restrictions, created by the situation on the ground as well as the preferences of the home institution, influence the themes and types of research findings that emerge from a particular country (Reny 2011). The lack of previously established infrastructure and the limited availability of secondary literature and ongoing academic debate can also lead researchers to focus on more "established" research areas (Goode 2011). In the case of Myanmar, I would argue that the situation of migrants and refugees in Thailand and elsewhere (although certainly worth the attention) has featured

disproportionally in academic research. I even noticed this effect back home where people who had vaguely remembered my interest in Myanmar often assumed that I was working with refugees in Thailand.[3]

Researchers are also dependent on the country and institution where they are based. Institutions in the United States and Australia are known for their rigorous requirements for ethical clearance before research can be conducted (Cribb 2004; Ditton and Lehane 2011; Metro forthcoming), while researchers in many European countries seem more dependent on the practices within their particular department or discipline.[4] Ditton and Lehane, for example, were initially denied approval to conduct research on the Thai-Burma border because the supposed expert who had been consulted by their university (a Thai postgraduate student) appeared to be hostile toward Burmese migrants in Thailand. Likewise, a student from New Zealand told me that her university had simply prohibited her from visiting Myanmar because it was considered too dangerous. As these examples indicate, the formalized guidelines for ethical approval "may encourage obfuscation, discourage some research from taking place at all, and may indeed be counterproductive" (Wall and Overton 2006: 62). In cases where knowledge about the local context is insufficient, the decision of the review board is often negative. The risk is that "[i]n the absence of academic analysis and debate on these important issues, field researchers act without the benefit of the knowledge and experiences of their colleagues and, thus, continually find themselves reinventing the wheel" (Mertus 2009: 1).

Judging from international coverage of Myanmar at the time, I might have assumed that people on the ground would

3 During the time I spent in Thailand, I did not focus my research on Burmese refugees, although I did have encounters with them and sympathized with their plight.
4 The majority of academic publications on research ethics I came across dealt with medical research, research in conflict areas, and research on populations identified as "vulnerable," such as children and refugees.

be unwilling to talk to me, especially when it concerned potentially "sensitive" topics. While the restrictions placed on foreigners in terms of travelling and accommodation limited my ability to obtain certain types of information, the Burmese people who came to be my research participants turned out to be happy to talk to me about their experiences, the challenges they faced, and the opportunities they saw for operating within "the situation" (as the military dictatorship was often referred to euphemistically; cf. Skidmore 2004).[5] Many of them appreciated the efforts of foreigners who personally came to observe the situation, giving them the opportunity to correct some of the misconceptions they encountered in the international media.[6] It turned out that they had found many creative ways to do or say things that were considered difficult or even impossible at first sight. For me, this emphasized the importance of looking beyond first impressions, something that required a presence on the ground and a continuous interaction with local contacts.

Assessing the Risks to Locals and Foreign Researchers

While until recently Myanmar made headlines for little other than its human rights violations, the physical risks to foreigners were negligible.[7] Although my contacts would occasionally joke that certain activities could lead to "free housing" or "free transportation" (meaning arrest or deportation), I never felt personally threatened. Occasionally a Westerner

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5 I focused primarily on young educated people in urban areas who engaged in societal activities, either in an organization or individually. I also had conversations with more established civil society representatives.

6 For example, several young people started their conversation with me by pointing out the misconceptions they had identified in the *Lonely Planet* guidebook that I carried with me.

7 I am referring to the part of Myanmar where armed conflict was absent; an assessment of the physical risks to foreigners in conflict situations might well differ from the analysis I present here.

was detained for ostensible political reasons, which were of course reported on internationally. James Mawdsley, for example, was repeatedly deported and even imprisoned after protesting against the government, and John Yettaw was detained for swimming to the house of Aung San Suu Kyi (James 2009; Mawdsley 2002). While both were released after intervention from their respective governments, it must be kept in mind that Burmese detainees do not usually have anyone that powerful advocating on their behalf.[8]

Westerners could be deported and blacklisted for a number of reasons, including voicing or publishing criticism of the government. A few deported Westerners reported publicly on their experiences, intending to show that despite internal and external attempts at democratization, the Myanmar government had shown again and again that it was not open to criticism, and that its political reforms were not genuine (Kuijper and Roesch 2010; Rogers 2011). These reports pointed to the continuing problems with freedom of speech and movement in the country. Yet in discussions on Facebook and elsewhere, critics questioned whether such overt activism would actually benefit local people, as the risks of being associated with Western activists might outweigh the benefits of generating international awareness. Occasionally, Westerners working "low profile" in Myanmar were also deported, but they preferred not to draw attention to what had happened to them. Although journalists and activists seemed to be the primary targets, the boundaries between activism and academic research are often blurred (Skidmore 2006), and some Western researchers were blacklisted based on perceived or real affiliations with dissidents. Although the physical risks were minimal, the consequences of being blacklisted ranged from having to focus on a different research subject, to being separated from loved ones residing inside the country.

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8 A more serious case concerns the Danish honorary consul Leo Nichols, a friend of Aung San Suu Kyi who was imprisoned for possessing an illegal fax machine in 1996 and died after allegedly being denied medical care.

Researching Sensitivities

In order to come to an informed risk assessment, I first had to understand which topics and activities were considered dangerous and why. The word "sensitive" was often used by my local contacts to indicate that something was contentious, undesirable, or illegal, and resulted in the evasion of certain topics on certain occasions (cf. Skidmore 2006). Several representatives of local organizations told me that they avoided the term "human rights" because it was too sensitive, while words such as "democracy" and "peace" were occasionally also considered sensitive. The fact that risks and sensitivities seemed to be identified by different contacts in different ways made this assessment more complicated, and demonstrated the need for context sensitivity, i.e., a detailed case-by-case analysis, rather than the application of general guidelines based on experiences in other circumstances.

Another complicating factor was that the notion of sensitivity and the resulting secrecy sometimes seemed to be used not only to avoid risk, but also to avoid exposure of certain practices or to maintain a particular impression of conditions on the ground. Although my primary concern was to avoid causing risk to research participants at any time, my role as an independent researcher also carried other responsibilities. Ideally, I should have enough access not only to report on my participants' experiences, but also to observe their practices, and describe possible inconsistencies or controversies. My own silences in this regard would contribute to the secrecy that I identify as a potential obstacle to the development of academic knowledge in and on Myanmar. Yet it was to be expected that my interest to bring out contestations was not always shared by the participants in question.

The restrictions and complications that come with living under a military dictatorship came up regularly in conversations with my local contacts. In the course of these interactions, I developed a list of words that my contacts used to describe what they considered "sensitive" in more covert terms. For example, while some referred to the military

government as "the regime" to emphasize a negative connotation, others used more neutral descriptions such as "the authorities," "the government," or even vague words such as "them." As mentioned, people often referred to "the situation" to describe the general conditions they had to live in under military rule without having to go into detail.

I soon learned that it was important to recognize the ambiguity of many sensitive topics, particularly in relation to politics. Before conducting my research, I considered politics to be among the most contentious topics in Myanmar, as it was strongly associated internationally with criticism of the government and calls for regime change. The experiences of some of my local contacts seemed to confirm this. One of them warned me that it would be difficult to identify political civil society: "all organizations say they are non-political ... the government strategy works. Trying to stay away from politics has become the belief of the people."[9] A representative of a local organization told me: "many of us want political change, but because of the situation, we have to call it social change." It was therefore surprising to realize that political activities were taking place more and more openly in the run-up to the 2010 elections. While some of these activities took place within the parameters set by the government, e.g., providing voter education, others criticized the political process. Campaigners called for an election boycott and for the release of political prisoners, which in itself was contentious as there were widely diverging views on which prisoners should be considered political (Assistance Association for Political Prisoners [Burma] 2011; Hudson-Rodd and Hunt 2005).

At first, I got quite confused when trying to make sense of which political activities were acceptable and which ones were not. Some organizations held public voter education events with implicit or explicit government approval, while others organized similar activities in a highly secretive

9 I conducted my interviews in English, and have paraphrased the quotes for clarification where necessary.

environment. After awhile, I realized that it was perhaps not so much the explicit content of the activities that was deemed to be sensitive, but rather the way political activities were conducted, by whom, and with what potential social impact. Association with former political prisoners, members of the so-called '88 Generation (involved in demonstrations against the government in 1988), or Aung San Suu Kyi's party National League for Democracy (NLD) and other well-known dissidents was particularly suspicious. A local representative from a social organization told me that they really wanted to cooperate with the NLD, but that they could not do so publicly as this would be a red flag to the government. Despite the increase in foreign visitors, the government appeared to keep track of people who visited the NLD office, and some of these visitors were questioned about it later.

Younger, less-known local actors, as well as those who chose to liaise with government officials, could get away more easily with certain sensitive activities, although they were careful not to cross the invisible boundaries that everyone felt existed, although no one was sure where they were. Some of my contacts referred to a "gray area" to indicate the ambiguous and insecure situation in which they had to operate. Many told me that they were not allowed to gather with more than five persons without permission. Yet holding group meetings or even public events was considered a vital aspect of their organizational work. In order to do so anyway, meetings were often organized in relatively safe places, such as the offices of international organizations, or the cultural centers of Western embassies.

Encountering Secrecy

The ban on public gatherings, the ambiguous legal status of many organizations, and the conspicuousness of foreigners inside the country complicated my access to some of these groups. Organizations that had no Western staff members were reluctant to receive a foreigner more than once, if at all, as it could raise suspicion of secret dealings with journalists

or activists. One of the ways to reach organizations without raising suspicion with my presence was to visit those groups that already worked with foreigners. Even though I was able to visit some of their offices repeatedly, many remained reluctant to share information. Contact was usually established through mutually trusted intermediaries, and reports were often shared with me personally, rather than being made available publicly.[10] In the few reports that were distributed publicly, the names of the local researchers or the organization initiating the research were often left out. It was explained to me that even if the information was a "public secret," it would be better for everyone if it could not be traced back to particular individuals on paper. I was expected to take similar precautions in my writing.

It is characteristic of authoritarian contexts that the actual experiences of people inside the country are not easily put on paper, either because they cannot be pinpointed, or because the very act of putting them in writing might have repercussions, thereby changing the local context. The result, however, was that reports of daily experiences in Myanmar were hardly available. When information did get out through the media or public reports, it was difficult for others to verify. In some cases, a prolonged discussion followed with representatives of organizations who had given me documents on whether I could treat the information as public or not, and to what extent I was allowed to refer to them. At some of the organizations I visited, I was told that it was "not necessary" to give them public credit for their work, or for the fact that they had helped me conduct my research. I was particularly uncomfortable with a request of a Western representative to have all reference to the organization's documents checked in advance. The reason given was that they did not want their information to be used for Western advocacy campaigns that they disagreed with (a concern that was mentioned by my contacts

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10 I have noticed that since 2012, more information is being shared through websites, Facebook, and other public platforms than in previous years.

more than once). However, such requests were not only practically difficult (given the limited communication channels and the changes in staff composition over time), but also felt as a form of censorship.

In fact, in some cases, my Western contacts in Myanmar seemed more suspicious or critical of my activities than my Burmese contacts. Although this might be partly due to cultural reasons (some of my Burmese contacts seemed reluctant to openly criticize a foreigner, especially one they had just met), I also felt that the young Burmese people I spoke to simply seemed less paranoid than both their older counterparts, and many of the Westerners with whom they worked. Some of the Westerners working on the ground might have felt a great responsibility to protect locals from risky exposure. Other motivations might also have played a role, such as protecting their own "gatekeeper position" between locals and other Westerners, or trying to emphasize the danger (and hence, importance) of the work they were doing. While I was always trying to be careful not to create trouble for anyone because of my actions, many young Burmese contacts spoke publicly about both my research and their own activities. If they showed concern, it was more often for my comfort than for their own safety. In the course of numerous meetings and conversations, there were only a handful of occasions when I actually noticed someone cutting off a conversation, or closing the door of a meeting space before addressing certain topics.

Nevertheless, in order to err on the side of caution, I always kept in mind that the consequences of being affiliated with foreigners for local people and organizations could be potentially severe. The government seemed particularly worried about contacts with dissidents in exile, and activists who operated internationally had often been convicted for contacting an unlawful association or illegal border crossing. Since I was in touch with Burmese organizations on both sides of the border, I had to make sure that my activities would not raise any suspicions. While some organizations were very open about their transnational contacts, others

concealed their affiliation with international democracy activists, or told me that these were too sensitive to discuss.

This atmosphere of secrecy and sensitivity to certain topics and contacts also affected my own way of working, sometimes resulting in a form of self-censorship. In particular, I was careful not to be closely associated with organizations that were known for their political or activist profile, because I worried about my local participants being inadvertently connected to "sensitive" contacts, in case someone followed my whereabouts. This meant that I sometimes decided to stay away from certain events or persons that could have provided valuable insights on the topics I was seeking to learn about (cf. Skidmore 2004). I tried to compensate for this limitation by paying particular attention to information distributed by activist organizations outside the country.

Becoming Secretive

Although I look back on many positive experiences in Myanmar, my initial impression of the country was characterized by much confusion and sometimes discomfort. Since the aforementioned conference, no one had told me explicitly not to undertake research in Myanmar. Yet many people, especially those working with Burmese groups in exile, warned me to be cautious. I was told that my presence might be noticed by the military intelligence, and that they check on people at unexpected moments. I was reminded not to carry any sensitive documentation on me, or store details of local contacts in a predictable place. I was to avoid using "sensitive terminology" in personal conversations and in e-mail. Some of the more outspoken dissidents I was in touch with were convinced that their e-mail account had been hacked or checked on by the government, and I wanted to avoid writing anything controversial in order to protect both my participants and myself.

Yet there were remarkably more warnings on what *not* to do, than on how to act responsibly in the field. In the process of trying to take all these warnings seriously, I sometimes

confused myself, forgetting for example where or how I had stored certain information. I remember one of my first nights in Myanmar when I was convinced that my luggage had been opened in my absence, a thought that would not have crossed my mind in other circumstances. Only later did I realize that I had not closed it properly myself. I had been warned to "grow antennae in the back of my head," but in the absence of any guidance on how to recognize government informants, I mistrusted almost any stranger who showed more than a casual interest in my whereabouts. Over time, this amounted to a large amount of people, as the Burmese I met turned out to be inquisitive people who loved the opportunity to chat with foreigners.

The mere fact that I had to consider these matters changed my mindset, and meant that I sometimes saw risks in behavior that in other contexts would have gone unnoticed. I often had to consider who knew what information, and protect the information I had gathered from unwanted attention. These "fear-based psychological barriers" (King 2009: 16), which were perhaps more based on the anticipation of other people's fears than my own, made me act more secretively than I would have in other circumstances. This sometimes took away time and resources that I would have preferred to spend on the contents of my research instead. Establishing contacts, building trust, and determining the right amount of disclosure often took up significantly more time than the actual interviews or activities I engaged in.

Some of my contacts (including Westerners working inside the country) commented that by being so careful, I was contributing to the myth about the reach of the military, and to the idea that nothing was possible in Myanmar. Occasionally, these critics would emphasize their point by publicly discussing Aung San Suu Kyi and other topics that had been identified as red flags by others, causing further confusion and sometimes discomfort on my part. These topics were discussed more and more openly when more researchers started visiting the country in the course of 2011. They did not seem as bothered by warnings and sensitivities and seemed able to

discuss issues that I had been hesitant to bring up. Given the rapid pace of developments in Myanmar since 2011, I do not attribute this discrepancy between my own behavior and theirs to oversensitivity on my part, or lack of context sensitivity on their part. It was simply the context that changed more quickly than any of us could have imagined. Yet, as mentioned before, no one could give me clear guidelines on where this invisible line lay that should not be crossed, and I felt that I owed it to my research participants to be as cautious as was reasonably possible. If, as some of them argued as early as 2010, the government was slowly loosening its grip, I was happy to leave it to local activists to explore the boundaries, with me reporting on their findings if and when possible. Radsch (2009: 103) writes: "Sometimes just because a door opens the researcher must assess whether she should enter."

Participant Observation

My choice to base my research project in the field of anthropology came with the expectation of participant observation, also referred to as "deep hanging out" (Geertz 1998). This methodology, characterized by informal and repeated contacts with one's research participants, seemed particularly suitable for the examination of local conceptualizations and priorities, and meant that I could avoid certain types of research activities that might have alarmed either my local contacts or the authorities. The information I obtained in this way was complemented by more formalized interviews that I conducted mainly outside the country, and sometimes in other places that were considered safe by my local contacts.

Fellow researchers had warned me against conducting focus group interviews inside the country, as it could draw attention from the authorities, as well as mutual suspicion among participants. I therefore decided to conduct some group conversations outside the country. During a conversation in Thailand with a couple of young Burmese people whom I had known for several months, one of them remarked:

"You know now we are sitting four together, and talking about politics. If you ask me these questions in Myanmar, I will not answer you ... because you know, we can't be sure, [whether there is] somebody from the government, some investigator." I told them that I would not ask such questions in Myanmar either, and they all laughed, and confirmed that in the set-up of that particular interview, they trusted each other.

One dilemma I faced was how to inform my participants about my research and get their permission to participate, without unnecessarily formalizing or complicating our relationship. As Metro (forthcoming) argues, using written consent forms can create problems when doing ethnography. It can have the effect of formalizing pre-existing relation-ships, and can create a hierarchy because the researcher claims formal ownership of the information that has been jointly created in interaction with local participants. Formal-ized procedures are also unsuitable for anticipating the unex-pected events one might encounter in the field, and having to sign forms can have negative connotations for people living under authoritarian rule (Metro forthcoming). While I never formalized informed consent with my participants by asking them to agree to a list of topics that I wanted to discuss, I always mentioned as soon as possible that I was working on an academic thesis, and that I might use the information they provided, but would protect their anonym-ity. The subsequent frequent inquiries into the progress of my thesis were an indication that my intentions had been under-stood, and that my participants had consented to take part.

Moreover, despite the absence of formalized procedures, my participants proved very capable of setting their limits and guiding the research when necessary. One tactic I noticed them use was the option of "voting with their feet": if the activities I had proposed did not seem relevant or acceptable to them, they simply did not turn up or ignored my attempts to establish contact. Another way to cut off a conversation that was going in an undesired direction was to say that I did not understand the situation, even though my reason for

talking to them was exactly to increase that understanding. While occasionally frustrating, such practices were an important reminder that most research participants can think and judge for themselves, and that creating a safe environment for people to speak their minds (or refuse to do so) in my case was more productive than using formal consent forms.

Trust-Building

Researchers have identified trust as the key condition for the successful establishment of contacts in the field, and for obtaining reliable data (Norman 2009). Before entering the field, I was fortunate to be able to consult a number of people who had recent research or work experience in Myanmar, and who agreed to introduce me, so that local people knew that I could be trusted. Another way to establish trust and to show one's genuine interest as a researcher is to spend significant amounts of time in the field, and to return to the field on numerous occasions (Norman 2009). Although I was unable to spend a long uninterrupted period in the field, I did visit my local contacts regularly in the course of my research. I also showed interest in their experiences by attending cultural events, studying the Burmese language, and taking on a Burmese name.[11]

Most importantly, establishing trust and confidence for participants to talk about sensitive issues requires considerable time and patience (Norman 2009). Painful personal experiences such as time spent in prison or the loss of loved ones rarely surfaced during initial conversations, and I often did not consider it appropriate to ask about it during interviews. Rather, participants often brought up such experiences in more informal contexts such as having drinks in a bar, or

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11 I consider the lack of fluency in Burmese by myself and many of my fellow researchers as an obstacle to better immersion in, and understanding of, Burmese society. Nevertheless, I must thank a number of very dedicated language teachers for their continued efforts to teach Westerners who are planning to work in or on Myanmar.

being on the road to somewhere. Similarly, many Burmese participants were reluctant to voice any critical remarks to an outsider like myself, and it often took several meetings and conversations before they felt comfortable to share their less positive experiences with me.

Lastly, an important precondition for trust and a fair relationship between the researcher and the researched is a certain level of reciprocity. Although I never offered financial rewards or other advantages in order to obtain information, I did try to take seriously all demands for assistance that were made by my research participants or people around them. This resulted in delivering workshops, helping with assignments for school or work, and attending charity events. In some cases, I engaged with organizations in a more formalized way by conducting short-term projects, which proved to be valuable experiences for my research. There were also a few requests that I had to deny, such as public media appearances and requests for substantial financial assistance. Despite my inability to meet these requests, I took it as a sign of trust that my contacts felt comfortable asking this of me.

Reporting Back from the Field

In addition to treating one's research participants respectfully and ensuring the confidentiality of their personal details, publishing the information obtained from them in a careful manner is one of the main responsibilities of the researcher (Sriram 2009). While not all of my participants could foresee the implications of the academic process, some of my Western contacts working on the ground at the time worried about the public dissemination of my findings. I particularly struggled with their advice to "put as many layers as possible" between my identity and my written work. This seemed to run counter to the core academic requirement to distribute one's findings publicly, and to take responsibility for the consequences. While I was eager to discuss my work in the region whenever possible, that was also where they thought the risk would be greatest. I took a number of precautions in

order not to raise suspicion, and postponed some of the decisions on what (not) to publish. In the course of my research, many of the people who had initially warned me to be cautious started to suspect that the situation was improving. As more and more researchers started reporting on the country, I felt more comfortable contributing to public debates as well.

Occasionally, I was warned by fellow researchers about a different type of risk, namely the potential wish by my participants to depict their situation in a certain way. "What are you going to tell them about your research?" one of them asked me. "When you mention human rights, they will refuse to discuss it, or give you the standard story. When you're critical of their organizations, they will not want to work with you. They'll tell you what they want you to hear, not what you want to know." While this is an inherent problem in empirical social research, and one of the main arguments for ethnography and triangulation, it becomes more complex when doing research in risky environments, as one has to distinguish impression management by gatekeepers from genuine safety concerns.[12] Indeed, I sometimes got the impression that it suited certain people that information about the country was not readily available. This way they could frame the situation as they saw fit. Occasionally, Western donor representatives also complained that their local partners seemed to take advantage of foreigners' presumed lack of knowledge about the country (e.g. the financial system or communication options).

I had read many ethnographies on human rights and development that were very critical or even cynical about the individuals and organizations that had been studied. Given my own NGO background and awareness of the difficulties of working in Myanmar, my goal was not to bring out inconsistencies and irregularities that one encounters in any field of work (academic research is no exception). On the other hand, painting too rosy a picture without mentioning any of the dilemmas and doubts I encountered would not be an

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12 I want to thank an anonymous reviewer for making this point.

adequate reflection of my experiences either, and would not do justice to the complicated and sometimes challenging goals that my contacts in Myanmar had set themselves, or the conditions under which they had to work. Here the notion of the "power of representation" (Gallaher 2009: 140) comes into play: the way a situation gets depicted involves continuous negotiation between the researcher and the researched. Participants may worry about being depicted unfairly or unfavorably, while the researcher must balance academic demands for a critical approach with the wish to maintain a good relationship with one's research participants in the present and future. The only way to do justice to both sides is for the researcher to engage in a continuous exchange with research participants concerning potentially sensitive issues, and to refrain from exposing information that can link particular persons to topics or events that they do not want to be associated with.

Conclusion

When I started working on my PhD project, I faced a great deal of insecurity about what would and should be possible in Myanmar. I was confronted with a variety of sometimes opposing views. Due to the flexibility of my university, I was able to explore the opportunities through personal experience, instead of having to go through formal ethical procedures that had little to do with the realities on the ground. It is to be hoped that the publication of more "examples by experience" (King 2009: 17) will prove helpful in making informed and nuanced decisions on future research in Myanmar and in comparable situations.

As a Westerner, I have many advantages compared to my local contacts in terms of physical security, the ability to come and go as I please, and the opportunity to share my views publicly. Yet for the context sensitivity that I have identified as vital to the production of knowledge on "difficult situations," I fully relied on the trust and cooperation of my research participants. It is thanks to their openness, and the

assistance of certain Western experts who put me in touch with a variety of local actors, that I was able to gather the data discussed here and elsewhere. While I argue for context sensitivity and consultation with one's participants as important conditions for ethical research, I believe that researchers working in "difficult situations" must make sure that they keep enough distance from their participants in order to take ultimate responsibility for the way the data are collected, protected, and disseminated. This involves looking beyond the particular information provided by research participants by looking for patterns, underlying motivations and inconsistencies, without taking advantage of the trust and confidence of one's research participants that the information they provide will not be used against them, or put them in danger.

Crucially, it is to be hoped that the new government of Myanmar will prove genuine in its efforts to improve freedom of speech and freedom of movement inside the country. An increase in the number of Burmese researchers working inside their own country might also change the dynamics between foreign researchers and their local contacts, as it can help Burmese people become more accustomed to the dynamics of research and the risks and benefits of participating. In the past, Burmese researchers were prevented from studying "sensitive" topics, and some were even imprisoned for distributing "secret" or "false" information. An increase in the number of Burmese researchers willing to address these topics inside the country would help to bring out more inside perspectives and a wider variety of views, since the opportunities and limitations they encounter will differ from those faced by foreigners. For researchers to become fully independent forces, they will need to be able to say and write things that might displease both governmental and non-governmental actors.

Ethical research dilemmas are not unique to Myanmar and will continue to arise. Researchers working on human rights in other countries tell me that they often have to leave out their most interesting data, because they do not want to be accountable for the consequences of publication. Ultimately,

it is the researcher who is responsible for the information that gets shared in the public domain, and in what manner. While unintended consequences of publishing one's research should be taken into account, the continuing sensitivities related to Myanmar are a reminder that we cannot (and, I would argue, should not) strive to publish only uncontroversial information. The more information we share, the better the readers will be able to make up their own minds. Context sensitive research and a greater role for local researchers will be vital for the successful gathering of knowledge on Myanmar in the years to come.

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