Relations of Trust, Questions about Expectations
Reflections on a Photography Project with Young South Africans

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ABSTRACT: This article stems from my doctoral research, which considers moral contestation relating to education in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. Overall, I outline a case for working with young people: addressing asymmetrical institutional and generational relations of power in order to enrich the knowledge generated by research. My focus is a project entitled My Future, which involved approximately forty learners drawing diagrams and using disposable cameras to produce representations of their moral judgements. Notable distinctions between data gathered during two stages of fieldwork, of differing durations, are analysed with reference to my relations with interlocutors and related institutionalised and public discourses of morality. Using the concept of trust, which is established during exchanges of mutually beneficial sociality, I argue that how we understand others depends upon what they expect from us and what we expect of them.

KEYWORDS: childhood, education, learning, methodology, morality, power, trust

Introduction

Before commencing my doctoral research at Ngomso School (pseudonym) in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa, I had worked with young people in London as a volunteer tutor delivering creative projects to those aged sixteen to twenty-five and as a ‘Learning Support Assistant’ and ‘Youth Mentor’ at a secondary school. Because of these experiences, I came to my anthropological studies with a strong sense that ‘the young’ can be just as insightful, intelligent and complicated as anyone. I knew that they were not incomplete adults – in the ‘process of becoming rather than being’ (James, cited in Honwana 2005: 34) – but human beings. Consequently, I hoped to work with young people in South Africa on equal footing; giving them power to help me gain insight into their lives, without counting their knowledge as inferior in any way. Mayall (2008) distinguishes between research ‘with’ and ‘on’ children when arguing that research does not have to accept ‘generational orderings of power’, where adult experience and knowledge is seen as distinct from, and superior to, that of children. Instead, we can see young people as ‘knowing something else that has to do with their particular situation and surroundings’ (Honwana 2005: 34).

Placing importance upon working ‘with’ young people and valuing their interpretations of their worlds conflates with the anthropological project more broadly. Indeed, Tim Ingold (with Lucas 2007: 287, emphasis in original) argues that anthropology is ‘not so much the study of people as a way of studying with people’. Anthropologists endeavour to learn from others by sharing experiences and relationships (Crapanzano 2014; Ingold 2013: 2). By continually oscillating between states of being attuned to interlocutors or themselves, they test and rethink their expectations, thus transforming knowledge of the world and the lives of those with whom it is shared (Jackson 2012). Just as I learnt in this way during my research,
In this article I focus upon the experiences and relationships that I had with some of the learners at Ngomso in order to consider what we learnt about each other. My discussion confirms something that John Dewey (1997 [1938]: 51) convincingly argued: although ‘education is found in life-experience’, not all life experiences are equally educative. I also follow Ingold (with Lucas 2007) and Jean Lave (2011a, 2011b) in arguing that knowledge is inseparable from, and must be understood in relation to, processes of knowledge production. Indeed, what I learnt about my interlocutors depended upon ‘how’ I worked with them. In particular, I will highlight the differing relations that I established during an initial stage of fieldwork, conducted in 2011 during a ten-month stay in South Africa, and a second stage of fieldwork, which involved a two-month stay in 2013. I will argue that my variable engagements with interlocutors influenced the extents to which we trusted and knew each other, and, as a consequence, my understanding of their lives.

My methodological and analytical orientation might appear to align with programmes of Participatory Action Research (PAR). Like its promoters and pioneers – such as John Heron and Peter Reason (1997, 2001; also see Heron 1995), Stephen Kemmis and Robin McTaggart (2005), Orlando Fals Borda (1987, 2006) and Paulo Freire (1970) – I consider research and the generation of knowledge more broadly to be a learning process that is relational, experiential and intersubjective.1 I also highlight and am wary of (1) positivistic claims of ‘superior knowledge’, (2) historically constituted, institutionalised and politicised relations of power, and (3) power relations that exist between ‘researcher and researched’.

However, my research project differs from PAR. Firstly, I do not consider myself to be one of the transformative, ‘active crusaders and heretics for the great adventure of peoples’ emancipation’ that Fals Borda (2006: 32) called forth.2 Although my research is critical (i.e. politically attuned) it is primarily interpretative: I have sought to ‘understand other people’s understandings’ (Ingold and Lucas 2007: 287) and alternative ways of being (or dwelling) in-the-world (see Jackson 1995, 2006; Zigon 2014). Secondly, in working towards a PhD, my actions appear to divert from Freire’s insistence that there be no more ‘elitist intellectuals’ (Mayo 2013: 16).3 Thirdly, I did not only conduct research with the disempowered, marginalised, oppressed and exploited (cf. Hall 2005: 12).4 Fourthly, I did not seek agreement or consensus with my interlocutors nor did I consult with them at every stage of the research project (i.e. conceptualisation through to writing) (cf. Kemmis and McTaggart 2005). Instead, I have found it valuable to step away from my engagements, for moments in the field or when returning home, when attempting to understand my interlocutors’ lives and their interests, actions and justifications (see Fassin 2011; Jackson 2012: 1–21). This article can be read as a reflection upon this research positioning and its impact upon productions of knowledge.

**Understanding My Future: A Project**

To address these concerns, I focus on a project entitled *My Future* that I completed with approximately forty learners at Ngomso, which produced diagrams and photographs.5 The first stage of the project was completed during my longer, more extensive fieldwork in 2011, with nineteen learners. I then returned to Ngomso during my shorter stay in South Africa in 2013, completing the second stage of the project with nineteen different learners. I hoped that the project would allow them to ‘speak’ with creative expression. My enthusiasm for such methods stemmed from experiences of creating films, adverts and websites with young people in London; however, they can also be understood in relation to traditions of collaborative methods in visual ethnography, such as the pioneering work of Rouch (2003) and Worth and Adair (1972; also see Peterson 2013).

The project followed the same basic format in 2011 and 2013. As the first component of the project, learners each completed two spider diagrams.6 These have the heading *Things That Are Helping Me for My Future* and *Things That Make It Difficult to Realise My Future*. I chose these headings without any notable planning or input from the learners. By memory, I wanted to understand their moral judgements of the people, places and behaviours they regularly encountered.7 With each group, I explained how to draw a spider diagram, before we completed one on the blackboard with collective effort. I informed them of the headings and made it clear that there were ‘no right or wrong answers’. I said that they could ‘write anything’ that related to each heading.

In 2011 and 2013, diagrams entitled *Things That Are Helping Me for My Future* contained phrases with positive sentiments, such as ‘right things’, ‘I’m supposed to do’ and ‘I want to be’. This is an example:
This word cloud summarises the key words and themes of all these diagrams in combination:

The second set of diagrams, entitled *Things That Make It Difficult to Realise My Future*, contained phrases with negative sentiments, such as ‘not right’, ‘bad’, ‘not good’, ‘wrong’ and ‘stop your future’. This word cloud serves to summarise this second set:

Across all of the diagrams there are examples of what Zigon (2007, 2008, 2010) calls institutional and public discourse aspects of morality: those moral beliefs and norms that are regularly recognised as moral, or not.

At Ngomso, for example, education/schooling, Christianity and reading were most frequently portrayed as moral, and drinking alcohol and smoking dagga (marijuana) as immoral.

As the second component of the project, learners then collected images using disposable cameras, which I provided and developed. I planned to use these images in my thesis when discussing their embodied moralities and moral judgements. Thinking they had already made relevant moral judgements when deciding what to write in their diagrams, I asked them to photograph people, objects, environments or anything else that would support and illustrate what they had written. I also told them how costly it was to purchase and develop the cameras, while encouraging them not to ‘waste’ the exposures. I also promised to give them copies of the prints.

Moving on to the project’s third component, Rose (2007: 12) states that ‘most of the recent work on visual matters is uninterested in the intentionality of an image’s maker’. In contrast, I was very interested in this issue. The images were, after all, a vehicle through which I hoped to understand the photographers a little better. I wanted to analyse their ways of seeing – the reasons why they captured certain images and what they intended them to illustrate – rather than my interpretation of the images (Berger 1972). To do so, I conducted what Collier termed ‘photo elicitation’ during his work in the 1950s (see Harper 2002). In short, I showed learners their photographs and asked them to explain them, while recording our conversations.

In this section I am first going to share some photographs that learners captured during the longer, first stage of my research in 2011.
This image was captured by Siphosethu, who was eighteen at the time and studying in grade six, which meant he was (potentially) six years away from matriculating from high school. When I first saw it I thought: ‘that’s not very helpful to my account of the moral dimensions of this young man’s life’. However, I took myself, as a viewer, seriously (Rose 2007), and shifted my expectations aside in an attempt to understand the meaning that he embedded in the object. His explanation was incredibly insightful:

The reason I took it was to show where we are living: here it is like a piece of sewage. There is dirty water there; they don’t have enough care ... the people that watch the cows. Cows must stay deep in the bush, where there is clean water. We are still eating that meat – we do not know if it is healthy or what, but we still eat it. I like the colour of the cows.

Siphosethu’s words convey insight into some interesting moral dimensions of his life: his wish that cattle owners would approach animal rearing with more care; that he is worried about his health and that of others; we also glimpse a dilemma associated with eating food that might harm you. Additionally, we learn that he likes brown and white cows, which reflects a localised, long-standing fascination with the aesthetics of cattle (see Poland et al. 2003).

The next image was taken by Thembani, who was seventeen at the time and who continues to be one of my closest interlocutors.

For me, understanding a little detail about Thembani’s life, which he shared over the course of numerous and emotionally intensive interactions, imbued the image and his explanation with new meaning. When he was five, his father estranged him after Thembani spoke to the police after his aunt had broken his arm with a metal pipe. Several years later he lost his mother to AIDS. Then, after he and his brother had moved into a residential shelter run by an NGO, a wealthy lady adopted his brother, before taking him to live elsewhere; effectively leaving Thembani without any ties to his family. As he told me about the weaver birds making their nests, I was not brave enough to ask if his admiration for them was connected to this personal history. However, my knowledge of it certainly affected how I understood what he was telling me.

Moralised Expectations and Relations of Power

This analysis of Siphosethu and Thembani’s images is a long way from the initial thoughts I had when first seeing them in the photography shop. Similarly, I frequently noted disjuncture between my interpretations of the images and my interlocutors’ explanations. In 2011, I was able to discuss my ill-informed interpretations with them. Through these conversations, I learnt that other people also misinterpreted them, without stopping to hear their side of the story. In effect, my interest in their words differed from their expectations of, and experiences with, others. As with any locality, there are moral expectations and norms in schools in the Eastern Cape that influence interactions between individuals. Both the research setting and my age had implications for how learners expected me to behave towards them and how they thought it best to behave towards me, and, resultantly and in combination, for the understanding that I gathered about their lives.

Firstly, by conducting the project in a school, I was inadvertently in a social setting – with ‘scenic parts of expressive equipment’ – that was imbued with pre-ex-
istent meaning and all manner of social norms (Goffman 1959: 34). Example spider-diagrams were drawn once the scribbled notes of the previous lesson were erased from the blackboard. I wrote with the same piece of chalk that had explained the less ambiguous rules of long-division. Other than pottery classes, which had some room for creativity, tasks always seemed to have correct or acceptable conclusions. More broadly, South African schooling has increasingly been concerned with targets and assessments, where ideas of ‘right’ and ‘valuable’ knowledge is tied to globalised imperatives of ‘human capital development’ (Sayed and Ahmed 2011). How was my claim that there were ‘no right and wrong answers’ to be evaluated?

Learners appeared to be surprised when I claimed that there were ‘no right answers’. They asked me to confirm this, as though it were a strange concept, before some individuals struggled to start their diagrams without some direction, which peers provided. Not everyone seemed sure about what I really wanted them to tell me, or, more fundamentally, who I wanted them to be. Blum (2013: 3) suggests that such power relations are integral to experiences of schooling: ‘Even at the best schools, there are deleterious effects that stem from the very nature of traditional schooling – a tendency to focus on “achievement” and its measures, no matter how it is brought about, and for students to become alienated from themselves as they learn to please the teacher’.

Although I was not their teacher (or ‘educator’ to use ‘local’ parlance) and despite my enthusiasm to work with them, I effectively asked them to complete a project I had designed. They sat in rows that faced towards me, the arrangement of our bodies and the direction of their gaze being integral to how power was structured between us (Foucault 1977). In retrospect, something quite special had to happen if our relationships were to be suitably differentiated from those they had with teachers; if they were to work ‘with me’, not ‘for me’.

The second variable, which is strongly tied to the first, was my age compared to theirs. There were two notable discursive moralities concerning hierarchies of generational power that I became aware of during fieldwork. The first was inseparable from the authority assumed by their teachers. As Durkheim (cited in Mayall 2000: 246) clearly explained: ‘Education is the influence exercised by adult generations on those that are not yet ready for social life’. He (2002 [1925]: 149) was adamant that schooling is the process whereby children are prepared for ‘serious life’ as adults. Without going into detail here, during my fieldwork, it was clear that members of staff at Ngomso agreed with him. This organisation of generational relations meant that the learners, or the ‘children’ (some of whom were eighteen-years-old), had diminished power (Ala-nen 2001, 2009).

The other factor that influenced generational relations of power was that all learners in grades six and seven, both in 2011 and 2013, identified with an amaXhosa heritage. Individual learners spoke about their ‘culture’ or ‘tradition/s’. One of the most prominent public, moral discourses that they had learnt to associate with this culture/tradition was respect (hloniphe) for seniority, which was frequently said to be an important tenet of being ‘a good person’. None of my young male interlocutors had taken part in ukwaluka or isiko lokwaluka, the Xhosa initiation ceremony that ‘ritualised’ the transition to manhood (see Mayer 1971; Mhlahlo 2009; Ngxamngxa 1971; Ntombana 2011). As a result all thought themselves to be (uncircumcised) ‘boys’ (inkwenkwe). Individuals told me that, as a consequence of this, they were regarded as a dog (inja) or inqambi – meaning they were regarded as an ‘unclean’ (i.e. morally impure) or ‘half-witted person of whom no good can be expected’ (van Vuuren and de Jongh, 1999: 144) – which was suggestive of their inferior value and power. When asked by an ‘elder’ (inroad (initiated) or mutate (father/matured man) or ixhego (old man) (Ntombana 2011: 79)) they were thus expected to do as he instructed. Although I had not been initiated, when at Ngomso and throughout my fieldwork, isiXhosa speakers frequently called me ‘bhuti’, which literally means brother but, because separate terms for ‘brother’ in the isiXhosa language are used to signify age-related respect, it also ‘implies elder and initiated’ (Ntombana 2011: 197). Most commonly, I was therefore not considered to be a boy, like learners were, but an elder.

**Trust and Understanding**

Quite simply, in working closely and for a relatively long period of time with individuals like Sipho, Thembani and other interlocutors in 2011, I believe that I managed to overcome, or transform, the moralised expectations and discourses that I outlined in the previous section. In other words, by distinguishing myself from teachers and elders, I was better able to conduct research ‘with’ my young interlocutors, not ‘on’ them (i.e. from an elevated or detached position of power).

Consider this extract, which I recorded during a conversation with Dala, who was fourteen and in grade six in 2011, and with whom I shared a relatively close relationship:
Oliver: Do you think that there is anything that happens at the school that you see but I will not see?
Dala: If you act like a person who deals with children [on their level, then] you will see [what we see]. If you like the bad guys, those guys can do wrong things in front of your face, [because] they don’t take you as their elder. ... You can see everything that they are doing by acting.
Oliver: By acting like the child?
Dala: Yes, but they will not show you that they are doing it except [when] you are acting.
Oliver: Do you think that I am acting like that?
Dala: Yes you are.
Oliver: Do you think that I am acting different from the teachers?
Dala: Yes.
Oliver: What do I do that is different?
Dala: When you don’t see your phone [where you left it], or [if] your bicycle is broken, you don’t rush [to report it]. You see? You don’t [say]: ‘I will call police’. You see? They [the teachers] are calling police when everything is OK. Like you see that [boy], you know Thembani?
Oliver: Yeah.
Dala: He likes the teacher’s phone. He likes to hold it, just hold it [not steal it]. ... Today Thembani take [the teacher’s phone] and put it in his pocket ... then the teachers call [the private security company] and then said that they will call even police. Then Thembani showed them their phone [which he never planned to steal]. ... But when your bicycle was broken [accidently by Onke in grade six] you didn’t rush [to conclusions] like them. You see? Maybe if it was their bike they would do something about that.
Oliver: But I did nothing?
Dala: You did nothing to children. You didn’t dislike the child. You just act like Oliver, you see?

In Dala’s opinion, by acting in a particular way during seemingly mundane occasions that necessitated moral judgements (Lamk et al. 2010), I had distinguished myself from the teachers and levelled generational structures of power to some extent. I did not rush to blame and punish learners in the way that he expected his teachers might have. His words reminded me of a poster in the principal’s office that read: ‘I’ve learned that it takes years to build up trust, and it only takes suspicion, not proof, to destroy it’. His teachers were, understandably, trying to prepare the young learners for the adult world in a Durkheimian fashion; directing them, rather than trying to understand them, was their primary concern. My distance from such concerns was particularly important to Dala when the ‘immoral act’ was a misunderstanding or accident. He valued me for it. It seemed that he had noticed my anthropological desire to refrain from passing moral judgement in order to gain understanding.

I tried for this same refrain when I talked with learners. Many of my interlocutors – young and old – frequently chose to share their thoughts, emotions and memories. Similarly, as a Youth Mentor in the U.K., young people would share anything that was ‘on their mind’. I learnt to be attentive to their desires for compassion, silence, encouragement and honesty, and to my ability to gauge appropriate forms of questioning, intrusion and distance. Often these conversations served a therapeutic or cathartic purpose, as they did during fieldwork. Some interlocutors in South Africa said they appreciated my inclination to listen to their fears, memories and hopes (also see Das 2007; Nordstrom 1997). These seemingly mundane interactions – our being with each other – were mutually beneficial (also see Besteman 2008: 154–6).

When we discussed our respective feelings, hopes and regrets in this way, it drew us together, or balanced our relations of power, as we learnt to trust one another. To follow Henderson (2012: 79–80), these ethical relationships with interlocutors – with nuances of recognition, intrusion, disclosure, vulnerability, listening, affect, compassion, understanding and laughter – were crafted and ‘emerged in the give and take of relationship and intimacy’; they were not crafted, nor emerged, without open, honest dialogue from all parties. Relatedly, Jackson (1995: 119) argues that ‘knowledge of others is primarily, not secondarily, a matter of sociality’, as we are incorporated into the world of others and must respond in some way in order to ‘gain a knowledge of that world’. How these relations are constituted and how we respond to our interlocutors has fundamental, often mistaken or unseen, effects upon the knowledge we gain. I understood my interlocutors because I gave them something in return for them welcoming me into their worlds, if only a pair of un-judgemental ears or the act of an adult trying to understand them as equals.

Once these relationships were established, I could ask an open question and the young person would talk for up to an hour with very little prompting. These conversations were often peppered with their observations and evaluations of their surroundings and situated experiences; the joys and challenges that their lives entailed. When we spoke about their photographs towards the end of my stay in 2011, it is not surprising that the discussions were similarly open and honest; we had already established trust. As I listened, individuals often diverted away from the images, diagrams and my prompting questions. This was even more notable because I knew that they...
deemed it disrespectful to interrupt an elder. Many would wait to be addressed by one, without offering opinions before being invited to do so. When leading the conversations about their photographs they were not acknowledging this public discourse of morality, perhaps because they did not see me as an elder.

This enthusiasm for going ‘off-piste’ was particularly pronounced with learners like Thembani and Siphosethu, with whom I had established strong relationships before the project was completed. They did not seem troubled by the risk of saying the wrong thing, perhaps because I had not judged them in the past. Because I was not a teacher/adult who ‘needed to be pleased’ and impressed, and whose instruction needed to be followed, their explanations were exciting and unexpected. They were aware of the prominent moral discourses at the school, which were evident in their spider diagrams; however, only one of them produced images and offered explanations promoting them (i.e. they concern alcohol use). Moreover, some spoke about ‘moral transgressions’, such as their reasons for drinking alcohol and smoking marijuana. Such transgression is not surprising because institutional and public discourses of morality provide possibilities for moral behaviour (Zigon 2009, 2010: 9; cf. Swartz 2009), but it is notable that those interlocutors with whom I was best acquainted trusted me with this knowledge. My working ‘with’ particular individuals to a greater extent than others is certainly integral to what I learnt about them.

My Future 2013

In order to comment further on how relations and engagements with interlocutors influenced my understanding of them and the knowledge generated by my research, I will now share some of the images and explanations that stemmed from the component of the My Future project that was completed with a second set of learners during my two-month stay in South Africa in 2013.

While the images and topics considered are obviously different, the photographers did what I asked: the images and explanations explicitly relate to their spider diagrams and the major themes of the word clouds (e.g. prayer/smoking/shooting/drinking). I remember that I was not surprised by the images or explanations, nor were they controversial in terms of the moralised education that I had observed at the school. The vast majority of the images and explanations captured in 2013 (i.e. 16 of 19) were similar in this regard.

Going some way to explaining the images and explanations in 2013, Zigon (2010: 6–7) argues that institutions ‘wield varying amounts of power over individual persons’ and ‘often claim to be the bearer and securer of the truth or rightness of a particular kind of morality’. Given this power, the majority of my interlocutors in 2013 seemed to reflect institutionalised moral discourses without leaving space for personalised, more surprising judgements (such as those shared by individuals like Siphosethu and Thembani in 2011). Their diagrams and explanations appear to be what they expected I might want to see and hear: the moralised truth claims most often promoted by their teachers. While some individuals may have embodied such moral possibilities (e.g. Cebisa may have avoided alcohol), their images and explanations might be false representations of their ‘real’ moralised judgements and behaviours (e.g. Cebisa might have drunk alcohol). When compared with my understanding of interlocutors in 2011, the difference is that I do not

Figure 6: Dumile (14) and Jama (15), photograph and explanation, 2013

6a - I took it because he is smoking. Life’s difficult because of that.

6b - You see that lady, she is carrying the fire arm. The picture is trying to teach us not to use them. We will never succeed if, maybe, we are using such things like that.
know if this was the case because none trusted me with such information and I did not feel comfortable asking for it.

The three remaining learners, who responded differently, used all of their allotted exposures to take multiple, sometimes repetitive images of friends and family. One of these individuals was quite coy and embarrassed when I returned with the prints and sat with her to discuss them. Our conversation was very stunted and I did not record her name. She apologised for having taken more than her fair share of exposures, leaving her partner with too few. I simply confirmed that she would still get some of the prints (I was trying to be fair to her friend) before she went back to class.

The other two learners who captured a similar series of images were Nokwanda and Andiswa:

All of Andiswa’s images were of her family. She explained some of the images by telling me that her subjects wanted the printed photographs I had promised to provide, which was understandable as Andiswa, like all of the learners, came from a family/home with little access to photography. However, she quickly added explanations like ‘She helps me if I do the wrong thing’ (see Fig. 8, right image) and ‘He is not helping me’ (in relation to an image of her brother). Similarly, all of Nokwanda’s images also depict friends and family. They appear to have been captured during a brief ‘photoshoot’ at her home. Nokwanda explained her images by saying that her subjects helped her in some way (e.g. Fig. 8, left image). All but one of her explanations – relating to images of herself, sisters, a cousin and friend – concern the importance of school attendance and literacy. Her final explanation related
to an image of her father: she told me that he advised her that she was too young to drink alcohol.

Andiswa and Nokwanda may have captured these images in order to explain their moral judgements of their subjects. However, I think it more likely that they used the exposures to secure printed photographs of loved ones and then later tried to explain the images by speaking of a moral relationship between themselves and the subjects captured. In short, I think they were mindful of my expectations and were trying to convince me that they had done as they were told. Again, I do not really know if this is the case or not because our relationship was not conducive to a discussion of this issue.

Clearly, during my two-month stay in 2013, my interlocutors and I did not gain the same level of understanding that I believe existed during my longer stay in 2011. Tellingly, I cannot picture their faces together with their names, as I still can with many learners from 2011. We spent less time together, shared less information about our lives, were less vulnerable in each other’s company, and did not put as much at risk or establish such trusting relationships. As a consequence, beyond introductions and limited interaction, they did not come to know the same me (i.e. Oliver) as individuals such as Dala, Thembani and Siphosethu knew in 2011. Instead, I simply enforced the norms of generational/teacher power by standing at the front of the classroom, asking them to complete a project I had designed and warned them not to ‘waste’ exposures, without first establishing trust during other interactions. How could they separate my instruction that there were ‘no right or wrong answers’ from expectations relating to our age difference and the research setting?

I think that our lack of being with explains why they presented institutional moral discourses back to me and tried to convince me that their images related to their diagrams even when they did not. They also relied heavily on my prompting questions and our discussions were less open. I returned to the U.K. feeling disappointed that I had only recorded their brief and rather generic explanations, while learning little about their moral judgements and understanding of the world. I cannot provide ethnographic data about any learner who completed the project in 2013 that would compare, in terms of detail and scope, with that I offered about Thembani (2011) because I do not know them very well at all.

**Conclusion**

As a way of concluding, I can return to the notion of working ‘with’ others. Following Emmanuel Levinas, Henderson (2012: 65) argued that by respecting their interlocutors, anthropologists can productively encounter analytical and research spaces where individuals ‘may surprise us’ when sharing something that highlights the limitations of generalised understandings. For individuals to feel empowered or inclined to surprise us, we must share a relationship whereby the expectation is that the unexpected will be welcomed. There is, of course, always a risk that it will not be. ‘Trust’, writes Ingold (cited in Jiménez 2011: 186), ‘always involves an element of risk – the risk that the other on whose actions I depend, but which I cannot in any way control, may act contrary to my expectations’. In our research with young people, especially, we have to try to give them the respect and power to act contrary to our expectations of them, and their expectations of us, in order to go beyond generalised (mis)understandings. Moreover, while the imperative to establish trust is true of all of anthropological research interests, it is especially pronounced when the research is concerned with understanding personalised embodiments and transgressions of institutional and public discourses of morality because we tend not to share knowledge of what is invisible or secret with ‘unknown others’ we do not trust (also see Bourgois 1996). I had preconceptions of my interlocutors’ lives, hence my instinct to discount the value of photographs that did not conform to my expectations of what learners would create. Fortunately, in 2011, some trusted me when I said that there were ‘no right and wrong answers’, and, as a result, felt free to surprise me. My understanding of their lives is all the richer for that.

For me, this article is not only an endorsement of attempts to conduct research with others, and, by extension, of ethnographic methodologies, implying lengthy periods of time ‘in the field’, but is also a statement about how our conduct with others impacts upon the understanding we garner about their lives and the knowledge our research generates. My closest relationships were those built upon trust: a particularly fragile arrangement of power. With trust, hierarchies of power – be they institutionalised, generational, racialised, gendered or whatever – can be confronted and transformed. When this happens we understand more about each other. I clearly know more about those individuals who trusted me, because I was more successful in my attempts to balance the power differentials between us. This process is no different from how we might want to construct any relationship: with enthusiasm for recognising and addressing uneven relations of power, while attempting to understand the expectations and moral dispositions of others.
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Notes

1. This statement might be understood with reference to the fact that the anthropologists I have been most strongly influenced by while coming to grips with my research data, namely Jarrett Zigon and Michael Jackson, draw from phenomenological and existentialist traditions in philosophy, as does some of the PAR literature and the movement as a whole (e.g. Fals Borda 1987; Heron and Reason 1997).
2. I find it telling that Freire’s philosophy and his programmes of activity are to some degree rooted in Christianised/liberation theology (Kiryl 2011; Lange 1998). Similarly, Fals Borda (1992: 15) considered PAR to be ‘an ideological and spiritual commitment’ that is ‘felt’ in the ‘heart’ (1995: n.p.). The fact that I do not seek to be of service to others as a form of spiritual service and commitment to God might help to explain why I have not ‘given myself to the cause’ in the same way that they thought possible.
3. More broadly, it may have become harder for transformative PAR projects to be fully realised by those who maintain allegiances with universities that are, as I have heard during conferences and from colleagues, increasingly resistant to activist/revolutionary type activity (also see Graeber 2004: 6–7; Hall 2005).
4. I have conducted research with a broad spectrum of interlocutors based in South Africa and the U.K. who, in my judgement, had varying degrees of power and influence. Didier Fassin (2008) convincingly argues that anthropologists often set out to solve problems for/with particular populations without considering the moral and historical foundations upon which such action is premised.
5. The age range of my interlocutors in these two grades was twelve to eighteen. This was significantly wider than other ‘mainstream’ schools because Ngomso was registered with the Eastern Cape Department of Education as a ‘Special School’. Moreover, it was not ‘normal’ for learners aged fifteen and over to be in schools that offered primary-level schooling.
6. To draw a spider diagram, you put a subject (i.e. key word, phrase or quote) at the centre of the page within a ‘spider’s body’ before drawing ‘spider’s legs’ that point to thoughts and ideas that you have regarding the subject of the diagram.
7. I most prominently discuss ‘the moral’ using the theoretical guidance provided by Jarrett Zigon (2007, 2009a, 2009b). Zigon sees moral dispositions, or embodied moralities, as individualised responses to, and productions of, historically constituted possibilities of how to act and live morally in the world. Such possibilities are encountered as dilemmas and judged with regard to the interests of the self and those of others. Although this explanation may insufficiently explain my use of the word ‘moral’ throughout this article, given space limitations, I hope it at least provides some clarification. I would refer the reader to Zigon’s work for further clarity.
8. Importantly, Collier did not demand that this method of ‘inserting a photograph into a research interview’ utilise photographs captured by those being interviewed (Harper 2002: 13). My methods have much in common with Rose’s (2007: 241–2) six steps of photo elicitation and those methods employed by Joubert (2012) and Swartz (2009), who terms her method ‘auto-photography’.
9. Before my fieldwork and during it, many learners at Ngomso spent months or years away from schooling. Some repeated grades as a consequence, having failed examinations. Additionally, some started when they were older than the mandated age of six. This explains why learners like Siphosethu were not ‘age-appropriate’ for their grades.
10. Peires (1982: ix) uses the term amaXhosa to ‘mean only those people who claim descent from an ancestor named Xhosa, that is the amaGcaleka and amaKharhabe of the present day’. During fieldwork I rarely encountered the term ‘amaXhosa’ and people instead referred to themselves as ‘Xhosa’. Consequently, from this point onwards, I use the term
‘Xhosa’ with reference to my interlocutors’ self-identifications, without claiming to be detailing a particular hereditary lineage.

11. The majority of my closest relationships with learners and past-pupils were with males. There were practical reasons for this. The school had a male/female ratio of about 70/30. Much fieldwork was conducted at a male-only residential ‘shelter’ where some learners lived. However, a more thorough evaluation of why I established closer relationships with young men rather than young women, and the resultant gendered dimensions of the knowledge I have about individual lives, could be the topic of another article.

12. I know that many of his teachers were fond of him and his peers.

13. Three referred to Christianity in their explanations, through the words ‘pray’, ‘God’ and ‘cathedral’, but not in order to suggest that the religion is moral (or not).

References


Jackson, M. (2012), Between One and One Another (Berkeley: University of California Press).


