

## Privilege

Stefanie Kappler, Durham University

### Introduction

*Banja Luka, Republika Srpska, Bosnia-Herzegovina. I am meeting with a museum curator with respect to my PhD project. The meeting takes place at the end of an extended field work period in the country. We end up talking about the curator's project ideas for which she would have to travel to different EU countries. She tells me that it seems almost impossible to realise these ideas as she will have to travel to Sarajevo to obtain the visas multiple times as this is where the embassies are. There are hefty fees attached to the visa process, alongside a long wait with a possible denial of the respective visa at the end. Sarajevo is a six-hour bus journey from Banja Luka, and the trip will therefore involve the need to spend the night in Sarajevo. I think about how I entered the Bosnia-Herzegovina myself, as I do whenever I arrive: I board a flight, get off in Sarajevo, show my EU passport at the border and pick up my bag. It does seem strange.*

More often than not, when conducting fieldwork as researchers<sup>1</sup>, we find ourselves in positions of privilege vis-à-vis the people we encounter. This can be very difficult to embed in our research frameworks, particularly when we are committed to normative approaches that condemn colonialism and inequality. How can we credibly research such phenomena when they are deeply engrained in the structures in which we conduct field research?

In fact, Caretta and Jokinen (2017) demonstrate how the colonial origins of field research have created privileges for the researchers (in their case, geographers) due to the ways in which it has systematically been set up, relying on local assistants and operating within a wider global system of inequality. It is this very system that puts us researchers in positions of privilege, depending on who we are and who we research. Privilege becomes a matter of social power and political differentiation. It is therefore little surprising that privilege and disadvantage have become important themes in feminist research. If we see privilege as a phenomenon constructed through social norms (Case, Iuzzini and Hopkins, 2012: p.3), we have to admit that we, too, are emplaced in and disseminate such norms. Our place in relation to who we are researching is therefore crucial in terms of what we find and research.

This chapter investigates the extent to which privilege is a phenomenon of intersectional inequality. Drawing on my field research experience primarily in South Africa and Bosnia-Herzegovina, I will show that being in a position of privilege can both advantage and disadvantage us in our ambitions to conduct field research. I will flag practical and moral

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<sup>1</sup> I recognise the problematic language of the 'field' and 'fieldwork'. I use it in this chapter as a way to tie in with the larger objectives of this book, but recognise to its colonial connotations (see Richmond, Kappler and Björkdahl, 2015).

questions that our positionality brings with it and reflect on the resulting uncomfortable interactions with our interlocutors and research assistants. To do so, I will outline and discuss field work 'situations' which I have found myself in to disentangle those to understand the multiple lines of privilege that run through them.

In terms of my personal research trajectory, I have conducted most of my field research in Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH), investigating the ways in which international peacebuilding policies are received and resisted locally. BiH is flooded with international researchers as well as diplomatic staff in its trusteeship-style peacebuilding process and generally considered a very safe country to conduct research in. More recently, I have started to research South African post-apartheid memory politics, spending time in different South African cities. I spent time visiting museums and memorial sites and talked to different memory activists across the country. Compared to BiH, field visits in South Africa are always accompanied by more difficult risk assessments as well as more security concerns. I was even given travel advice specific for white, female travellers in order to prepare for field research in South Africa – although this was not my first research trip to South Africa. That, in a way, made me even more aware of my identity in relation to where I was going.

Bosnia-Herzegovina and South Africa have very different histories and challenges, and my experiences between the two are significantly different. However, during field research in both countries, I have been confronted with a challenge of finding my place in a political context of which I was not part at first glance. And whilst it may be more 'normal' for BiH to see large numbers of foreign scholars to research the Bosnian peace process, I was still (or maybe because of this) asking myself whether it was my position to conduct research there. In South Africa, I was asked this question directly. How would Bosnians or South Africans benefit from sharing their stories with me? This of course raises questions about our research process more generally, but specifically about how we see ourselves in relation to those we research. Each time, we negotiate and legitimise our position vis-à-vis our interlocutors in new ways. The situations I sketch out below can therefore be read as such negotiation processes in which I try to make sense (to myself and to the researchees) of our mutual relationships. Questions of privilege and disadvantage are always implicit in such subtle negotiations, but rarely ever thematised directly.

### **Intersectionality, visibility and privilege**

*Johannesburg, South Africa. I am interviewing a white, seemingly middle-class, male professional who explains to me that he may look very privileged, but in fact he has come from a rather poor background and is struggling to find his place in society. People tend to consider him as a privileged person as he is white and has employment. Yet he has had to take on a job that he does not like very much as he needs to be able to feed his family. To a certain extent, I feel like he is talking much more to my male research assistant than to me, and I am a bit annoyed by that. On the other hand, I am not sure I should judge him as I am in a position where I was able to choose my job fairly freely, and I enjoy what I am doing. Unlike him, I am not confronted with my whiteness on a daily basis either.*

Mainly, but not only, from feminist research do we know that privilege is an intersectional phenomenon (Case, Iuzzini and Hopkins, 2012; Case, 2012). Crenshaw (1989) originally coined the term 'intersectionality' to point to the multiplicity of inequalities that dominate society – whether that be based on gender, race, class or other categories of social differentiation. If we acknowledge that there is more than one dimension of social stratification, this also means that, as a researcher, we can be privileged in one dimension, but disadvantaged in another.

The situation above shows that, during this interview, I felt a clear gender dynamic – the interviewee speaking to my assistant more than to myself – which made me feel uncomfortable. On the other hand, I was also aware of my privilege of being employed in a permanent and enjoyable position. The conversation made me very conscious of the fact that being white in Europe is a very comfortable position. In contrast, my interviewee felt like he had to shoulder the guilt of white supporters of apartheid when he had only been a child during that time.

My white privilege is specific in that it is not generally visible when I go about my everyday life in the UK. Case suggests that there is an 'invisibility of whiteness' (Case, 2012: p.79) – but of course more so in Northern England, where I am based, than in South Africa. That is one of the tricky aspects of privilege: it often comes in disguise as it is normalised in the everyday. It becomes visible the moment one does not have it. The same holds true for questions of class and inequality. For me, it may be easy to assume that I have earned my permanent job through hard work and persistence and to forget about the fact that I had had access to free education and scholarship schemes, so I did not have to worry about making a living that much as a postgraduate student.

It may precisely be the moment of encounter with those less privileged – something that often happens during fieldwork – that our own privileges become visible. It is therefore notable how primarily female researchers write about 'privilege', which again may suggest that it is felt through its absence rather than presence (cf. Coston and Kimmel, 2012: 97).

Inequalities must therefore not be reduced to gender, but, as my example shows, they emerge from a more subtle and multi-dimensional process. Which ones of our privileges become visible depends on our interlocutors and encounters. What they may lack becomes visible in us, and vice versa. In that sense, privilege must be regarded as relational and situational at the same time. Townsend-Bell argues that "[o]f course in reality it is not just the fieldwork setting that varies; the relationship of the researcher to the field matters a great deal—and that may be much more dependent on our specific identities than we have previously credited" (Townsend-Bell, 2009: p.311). Townsend-Bell (2009) describes how, depending on her situation, sometimes her gender identity was primary, whilst in other instances, race seemed to be a more salient characteristic (p.312). How our different identities intersect is therefore always situation-dependent. We should be aware of the types of 'situations' that we create during field research and that we find ourselves in in order to understand what impacts such dynamics may have on our reading of the 'field'.

Our encounters during the research process can therefore be a good opportunity to recognise our own privileges that would otherwise have remained unseen. It allows us to be more cautious in the categories we construct as it helps us acknowledge that they are relational. Making visible our privileges and disadvantages alike can be a first step towards a more nuanced encounter with our research participants. The implications of this reach beyond just stating our privileges vis-à-vis the research participants whilst maintaining a position of superiority over them. Instead, it has to mean an ethical approach to data collection, that is, refraining from collecting data that could harm the research participants, including research assistants in the benefits that come from a potential publication (possibly in the form of co-authorship or other desirable rewards) as well as, more generally, putting those in less privileged positions ahead of one's own career ambitions. After all, as researchers we are highly dependent on their support, despite the fact that the benefits of the research process are hardly ever shared with them.

### Open and closed spaces

*Lwandle, township outside Cape Town, South Africa. We have just visited the Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum, commemorating the poor working conditions that Black migrant workers have faced since colonial times. The museum in the township highlights the continuing injustices in the housing sector and the privileges of white South Africans when it comes to land allocation and housing. The museum is empty, we are the only visitors and the staff are taking photos of us whilst we are walking through the small museum room. They offer a short 'guided tour' through the township afterwards. We see women washing the dishes at the public water source, others are barbecuing meat. We are told that the inhabitants had hoped to be able to sell this meat to all the tourists that the museum would attract – but we are the only ones. I am not sure whether this form of 'academic township tourism' is the right thing to do. On the one hand, the Lwandle people are hopeful for the small income outsiders can bring. On the other hand, I feel uncomfortable getting a tour of people's everyday lives. Would I feel comfortable if it was the other way around? Should I be here?*

Privilege is not a one-dimensional thing. It can open many spaces, but close others. I needed certain privileges to be able to get in the position to do research, mainly to grow up in a society where I had access to (higher) education and was able to obtain a scholarship to fund this. Yet (or therefore) it feels almost hypocritical to study other people's lack of privilege. How can I legitimately write about their experiences? Is it ethical for me to walk around in a township for research purposes?

This argument can also be turned around. Being disadvantaged in some respects can open research spaces in others. For instance, whilst being a woman may not always be an advantage in academia due to its partly patriarchal structures, it can certainly be important when specifically liaising with other women's challenges during field work. Similarly, I have found that, when revealing one's own vulnerabilities to research participants, it can create a form of solidarity and lead to otherwise impossible connections.

In a way, whether we are able to establish a connection with our research participants may depend on whether we are able to be upfront about our vulnerabilities. If the power inequalities between our research participants and ourselves are too steep, this may be an almost impossible task. Henry argues that

it is apparent that many difficulties arise in the course of conducting research in relation to how a researcher should represent herself to her participants both for the purpose of facilitating access to interview participants and keeping a check on power relations between participant and researcher (Henry, 2003: p.235).

It has to be added that whether a form of privilege plays in your favour or against you depends on the type of space and situation you are in. In my case, as a white woman, my identity can be a real privilege when it comes to talking to a women's advocacy group. But can I talk about the experiences of Black women in South Africa? Can I write about the Lwandle community in a non-colonial way?

I cannot offer a clear solution to this dilemma other than suggest to identify the spaces in which we can connect with our research participants in a meaningful way, without resorting to a patronising language. Sometimes, spaces seem only closed to us because we have not looked well enough or because we are too attuned to top-down or even colonial methodological roots (cf. Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). However, if we can look for the multiple possibilities of solidarity through our gender, class, race (and many other) forms of identity, a conversation may be possible.

### **Privilege and solidarity**

*Cape Town, South Africa. I am attending a dialogue event with South African and international attendants. In small groups, we are talking about everyone's own painful memories and how they relate to each other. A young Black American woman points out that Black Americans and Black South Africans share a similar history of oppression. Yet, she adds that one of the obstacles to solidarity between those groups is the fact that mainly white and wealthy Americans travel to South Africa. To South Africans, she says, this evokes the impression that 'all is well' in the US and undermines the possibility of showing solidarity with each other.*

*Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina. In anticipation of a workshop, I sit in a café in Sarajevo's picturesque old town with a few academic colleagues from the UK. One of the academics tells me that he does not understand what the problem with the country is, people seem fairly happy and to be leading a decent life. I ask him whether he has been to the country before? Never, he says. When has he arrived? Just yesterday, he responds. Has he been outside of Sarajevo's old town? No, he has not, he responds, but it is clear to him that there is much ado about nothing.*

Solidarity can be a powerful response to a power differential that emerges from different levels of privilege. At the same time, privilege may also prevent the emergence of solidarities. The latter are very important instruments of change. Hence, when reflecting on privilege, one always has to consider the exclusions that it creates when we fail to relate to the oppression of others – or vice versa.

The two situations above reflect the extent to which privilege does not have to be a passive feature of a person or a group, but can be an active choice. Choosing to engage with someone who is less privileged than oneself often requires entering unfamiliar spaces. That in itself is a difficult and ethically challenging decision as it has to be done in a non-patronising way, as I suggest in the previous section. However, we have to critically interrogate our selection of spaces and interlocutors as it is directly linked to our gaze as to what we consider worthy of investigation. Instead of representing a factual given, privileges reflect what we are willing to observe.

Privilege also determines mobility. The South African example clearly highlights the extent to which financial privilege influences who we are able to meet. Even in an age of social media, the ability to build transnational chains of solidarity still largely depend on the financial means to evoke such mobilities. Some may never have the opportunity to meet differently-privileged people due to travel restrictions, whereas “dark tourism” tends to create situations in which financially privileged tourists experience exoticised versions of poverty (cf. Witz, Minkley and Rassool, 2017). On the other hand, we can see from the Bosnia-Herzegovina example that this is also a matter of choice. Where are we prepared to go and who do we want to engage with? Either way, and this is my deduction from the second situation here, it is important not to jump to conclusions or generalisations too quickly. We always need to keep a clear eye on our privileged or disadvantaged position and how this shapes our research findings as well as the spaces in which we move. This is always a relational exercise, as Townsend-Bell confirms:

My sense of racial solidarity led me to want to portray black women’s groups in the best possible light; assumed expectations of racial solidarity on the part of black groups made me nervous about the consequences of my criticism for future work with said groups (Townsend-Bell, 2009: p.313).

### **Privilege, complicity and guilt**

*During my PhD field research in Bosnia-Herzegovina, I stay in a house with a three-generation family. Relative to my funding, I pay comparably little rent to the family who share a few tiny rooms with changing numbers of three to fifteen family members. Some of the younger children are orphans and the different generations struggle to find employment in post-war Bosnia. It feels strange to me to be a guest in a house where space is tight anyway. And although there is a lot of hardship on this family that I can only imagine, they never let me feel it and make me feel welcome every single day. They share their food with me and call me one of theirs. I am almost embarrassed by their kindness.*

*South Africa. It is an awkward feeling to sit in the company of people who have fought against apartheid with their lives and have paid a very high price for it. Some have lost family members, some are traumatised, some have been in prison and some were wounded. I do not really know what to say as I feel embarrassed that I have never had to make such sacrifices to live a dignified life.*

*I walk through a township on the outskirts of Cape Town and am starting to feel guilty about my own life. What am I doing to support their struggle? Should I be acting or would this be patronising? That night, I write in my diary that “[s]omehow I feel that my presence in the township exacerbated the sense of differentiation of the different lives one can theoretically live.[...] I have a feeling of guilt, shame and complicity in relation to people’s suffering and inequalities.” (field diary, 4 July 2018).*

*A South African artist tells me that it is really difficult to obtain the copy rights for journalistic material (photographs and film recordings) from the foreign media companies that produced this material during the struggle against apartheid. In fact, they tend to charge very high fees to those who want to use that material in their own work. The artist suggests it is a way of ‘stealing our history’. I start thinking about my own work: am I at risk of doing the same? Is my career also based on telling stories who should belong to those who have lived and experienced them? It seems not fair that people are talking to me without charging ‘copyright fees’ whereas they have to pay those fees to access media material of their own histories.*

I would go as far as to suggest that, more often than not, as researchers of conflict and violence we find ourselves in positions of privilege vis-à-vis our researchees. The situations I sketch above are just a small sample of situations I have found myself in and which reflect my privileged position. Yet, what is more, there are situations in which we are complicit or benefiting from an advantaged position. For instance, I benefited from the affordable rent in the Sarajevo family house. I keep benefiting from my access to other people’s stories and histories, it is useful for my publication record. I am complicit in the neo-colonial setup of academic field research. There is no denying this is the case, as emancipatory as our ambitions may be. In a way, one could even say that our field research risks complicity with a global system of inequality: interviewing people who are already in precarious employment (as is often the case with civil society actors) or in no employment at all without paying them for their time can be an unethical thing to do. They may have little to gain from the research process for them, whilst our careers may thrive as a result of it.

So what does that mean for how we should go about our positions of privilege? In a speech, co-authored by his wife, a Johannesburg-based school deputy principal speaks about this very question. His main message for his pupils is that the most important thing to do is to acknowledge privilege: “Your denial is not harmless. In my mind, it should be a crime” (Bechus

and Leathem, 2018). The point is not about whether to feel guilty or not, but instead to think about one's positionality and acknowledge one's advantages. This then means that we may be able to use that position to do something meaningful with it. Of course, I do not want to suggest a quasi-colonial approach of speaking on behalf or claiming to externally empower local actors. Instead, there may be ways of being helpful back to those in less advantaged positions. Starting to recognise that our achievements are only partially due to our own merits and to a large extent down to privilege is a small, but important starting point. It means that there is, implicitly, respect for others who have had less opportunity in life as it allows for a much more nuanced understanding of different life stories.

There are certainly also more pro-active ways of dealing with our guilt and complicity. For instance, I often ask myself whether I have contacts that I can pass on and that might be useful for others. Am I in a position where I can be of use? I will explore some of this in the next paragraph in more detail, but including less advantaged individuals or organisations in funding proposals or putting them in touch with one's own contacts may be one possible option. Flagging the visa issue to my own government may be another. Whether this is appropriate needs to be decided in dialogue and is context-specific. By all means does it have to avoid the 'white saviour complex' (cf. Theriault, 2014).

I am certainly not suggesting that we should take such steps to alleviate our feelings of guilt where we have them – often such feelings are quite justified and perhaps the price to pay for one's privilege. However, it can be one way, also put forward by Bechus and Leathem (2018), of transforming it in constructive ways.

### **Privilege and expectations**

*South Africa. I am in a meeting in which I hope to find out more about the ways in which dominant memory discourses are locally perceived. Yet, before we sit down, my interviewee asks me how I will be able to support their organisation's cause. Will I be able to raise money for them? Do I have access to political platforms on which I can promote their cause?*

Being in a visibly privileged position often means that we can more easily access resources and networks. Sometimes privilege can be perceived only, but often it is real and just invisible to ourselves. We can be so used to certain advantages that we forget that they are not available to everyone. In my case, opportunities I have include access to a number of funding schemes (within and outside the university), contacts with policy-makers as well as with students – potential future policy-makers. This may seem little, particularly in the light that, often, funding applications are rejected or our (policy) contacts may not be too interested in our suggestions. At the same time, expectations on us as researchers to give something back to the people we are speaking to are, I would say, entirely legitimate. As I have outlined above, in a context in which we are complicit with a system of exploitation vis-à-vis our interviewees, it would be surprising (to say the least) if we did not consider giving something back.



Certainly, in many cases, there are very limited options for us to return the favour, despite being in a situation of privilege. We may simply not be able to access what we are being asked for. It is therefore crucial to avoid making empty promises to people and to be upfront and realistic about what we can do. If that means that we may not be able to get a particular interview, then that is a legitimate response on the part of the potential interviewee.

At the same time, Case has argued that it is important to use our privileged position as a researcher to promote justice more generally (Case, 2012: p.92). Again, this goes back to my earlier point, we have to reflect on the ways in which we can do so in a non-patronising way. How do we make sure to not intervene in a community on behalf of one set of actors, yet thus negatively impacting on a different set of actors? An informed decision requires in-depth knowledge of the socio-political context in question, and it is generally best to be cautious about any intervention when unsure.

Often, we may not even be aware of the different possibilities of cooperation that exist and it is always worth speaking to our interlocutors about possible, ethical and strategic ways of working together. Certainly, this then also means that we can no longer consider ourselves as objective and uninvolved researchers. Instead, this means that we engage in some form of action research, which comes with its own challenges (cf. Brydon-Miller, Greenwood and Maguire, 2003). Yet, it seems impossible to recognise one's own privileges without also admitting one's participation and bias in the research process. In fact, if we let go of the notion of impartial and neutral fieldwork, then making an engagement for the cause of social justice, for instance, is not a big leap. An engagement with privilege not accompanied by any in-depth reflection on its implications seems meaningless.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have argued for the differentiated recognition of the privileges and disadvantages as we encounter them as researchers in the field. The latter are not generic to the 'class' of researchers, but instead intersectional and specific to who we are. This is linked to our identities in relation to gender, race, class, disability, sexuality – and many more. Which feature is salient and matters for our research is always context-specific and changes across time and place. To that end, I have outlined a number of 'situations' in my personal research trajectory that made me think about power differentials between researcher and researchee to show that it would be wrong to say that we are categorically privileged or disadvantaged. Rather, our privilege is malleable and relational. At the same time, we must not fall into the trap and 'make it all about ourselves'. When reflecting on privilege during field research, it is important to not use it as an exercise to centre the analysis away from the research subjects, but instead as a way to engage in a dialogue with them, or indeed to de-colonise our research methods and aims. This argument is based on the acknowledgement that all research is relational and shaped by multiple lines of socio-political and economic differentiation. It then has to be our aim, as reflective researchers, to highlight such power divergences.

This raises an important question: How can we deal with (not only discuss) privilege in an ethical and responsible way? I would suggest that this has implications for our stance towards 1) our research subjects and 2) colleagues within the academic community.

First, recognising privilege when we see it is an important step, but it has to be more than an acknowledgement. McCorker and Myers outline this problem in their own research as follows:

[...] we handled the race effects question using many of the same discursive strategies that appear in the literature—with a nod to our privileged position as white academics; a shrug regarding the influence of our positionality on our relationships with respondents and our analyses of their worlds (McCorkel and Myers, 2003: p.206).

But of course, merely adding a qualifier to our research outputs does not really signal an in-depth engagement with this issue. Rather, it requires a more profound rethinking of our categories, the invisibilities in our research as well as a dialogue with those we research about their needs and ethical demands on the jointly-produced research. What this looks like in practice varies from project to project, but making it part of the research process as a whole (not just a small isolated methodological statement) seems important here.

Second, the ways in which we deal with questions of privilege has implications in terms of how we relate to the academic community more broadly. I am referring to a certain degree of essentialisation in attitudes towards field work in much of the peace, conflict and development literature. Whilst I generally agree that we should be talking to and meeting with the people we research, I would suggest that there is a danger of judging people and their academic credibility according to the length and danger of the fieldwork they have engaged in. At first glance, it often seems more impressive if someone has conducted several years of fieldwork in a war zone far afield than someone who has conducted research in a European city, to quote but one example. I certainly do not want to diminish the creativity and personal sacrifices that come with 'difficult' fieldwork. However, we often forget that the ability to conduct extended field research may also be an expression of privilege. It may be as simple as access to funds, insurance cover or contacts that determine whether or not someone is able to conduct extended fieldwork in particular locales. What is more, there are additional obstacles faced by researcher with disabilities (or, better put, different abilities<sup>2</sup>) or those with caring responsibilities. The latter affect women disproportionately. Such limitations crucially impact on the extent and type of fieldwork someone can conduct and will require an adaptation to personal circumstances, whether they be related to caring, disability, or others. It is therefore crucial to not judge the quality of fieldwork by its length or the place itself – not all 'dangerous' fieldwork is good, and not all good fieldwork is dangerous. In that sense, if we are serious about recognising the intersectionality of privilege in our research, this needs to not only apply to our research participants in the field, but equally to how we treat and judge our colleagues. Access is always a phenomenon of intersectional privilege.

To conclude, I want to therefore suggest that privilege is never simple. As researchers, we are not necessarily and equally privileged or disadvantaged. Some of us enjoy privileges in more situations than others. As we have different relationally- and situationally-dependent

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<sup>2</sup> Many thanks to Mary Hames for our insightful discussion on this topic.

privileges, it is important to not judge each other when we do not know the full story. More caution in our judgement towards researchees and colleagues alike is a helpful step towards the recognition of privilege.

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