The 'throwntogetherness' of research: Reflections on conducting field work in South Africa

Introduction

Just after crossing the Tropic of Capricorn, heading north through Limpopo Province, South Africa, one begins to see the rugged outline of the Soutpansberg Mountains on the horizon (see Figure 1). The mountains bring four things to my mind. One is their geology. Though they are as much as 1.8 million years old, they are still changing, still forming, still taking shape: rains erode them; roads and houses and farms cut into them. A second issue is bird life, specifically that birds breeding in Europe, such as the Yellow Wagtail and the Steppe Buzzard, spend much of their lives in the Soutpansbergs. The Soutpansbergs *are* far from Europe, but yet these birds establish stretched out connections between the two places. A third issue is also about connections: all along the Soutpansbergs there are antennae, transmitters, aerials. It's difficult to say which belonged to the South Africa military, to mobile phone companies or Internet Service Providers; but what was important to me was that they helped me keep in touch with people in the vicinity via mobile phone and with people abroad via the Internet. They were part of a 'coded infrastructure' (Dodge & Kitchin, 2005) that facilitated much of what I had to do in the region (on how these technologies forge 'coded spatialities' of fieldwork, see Fraser, 2007a). A final issue is the people who live along the mountain range, some of whose actions I wanted to try to grasp. Most are indigenous VhaVenda or Tsonga people. Their access to land has been curtailed for the last 100 years after the arrival of white settlers, mostly Afrikaners, who throughout most of the twentieth century have benefited from a raft of racially discriminatory land (and

other) policies. It was this inequality in land rights that led me to the Soutpansbergs in August 2004 to conduct my doctoral dissertation research on the politics and geography of South Africa's land reform programme (e.g. see Fraser, 2007b).

I mention these four issues about the Soutpansbergs because they remind me of the chance and structured combinations of forces and relations that make space and place. In *For Space*, Massey (2005) eloquently explains how the spaces and places we all come to know stem from this combination of order *and* chaos, from the calculations of technology and profit and politics, to the accidents of history, geology, and indeed social relations. Colonialism combines with geological processes; climate change mixes with capitalism; and so on. Space is a product of plans and deliberate representations mixing with accidents and chance. This is what lies behind the notion of 'throwntogetherness' -- the sense that an unpredictable heterogeneous mix of 'distinct trajectories' meet up, interact, and get thrown together in space. Space, then, is a product of throwntogetherness. But in this short paper I want to stretch Massey's notion of throwntogetherness to explore how throwntogetherness matters in research, too.

The throwntogetherness of research *practices*

Naturalized, hegemonic assumptions about research tend to imagine and represent the activity as an ordered, rational process that should progress in a linear fashion in clearly-defined steps and with sensible hypotheses and feasible objectives (for a critique, see Law, 2004). Such a view of research reflects a much broader essentialist drive to 'construct illusions of certainty amid uncertainty' (Ettlinger, 2007: 320), to know what must and what will happen during the research process. Crucially, this view of research shapes selection

criteria in many funding agencies. Consider, for example, the practice of funding agencies awarding grants using criteria such as 'feasibility'. The word 'feasible' stems from the French word *faisable*, which means 'possible' but also 'easy', or 'convenient'. As such, using feasibility as a criterion for allocating funds implies that research can be planned, rationally calculated, well-thought-through and in essence predicted. What funding agencies promote, therefore, is a type of proposal-writing that tries to calculate and predict with certainty. Yet imagining research as something that can be made 'easy' or 'convenient' belies the complexities of the endeavour, the contingencies that emerge, and the chaos that can reign during intense research moments. As noted by Law, research entails encountering a world in which "relations intersect and resonate together in *unexpected* ways" (Law, 2004: 156; my emphasis). Just as much as *structures* of social relations cut across the Soutpansbergs, these structures intersect with geology, ecology, and capitalism in unpredictable ways. The challenge for researchers is to find ways to work through these 'untidy geographies' (Ettlinger, 2004).

Of course, none of this is to say that funding agencies are mistaken to consider whether a proposal can occur (whether it is 'feasibile' or, better, realistic). But downplaying the openness of chance in favour of a sense of certainty does play a role in the making of some problematic present-day practices, such as funding Doctoral students for a set period of time (three or four years, say) which closes off the possibility that the student might reveal 'data' whose study requires more time. Given this, I suggest a re-thinking of the mainstream normative cultural politics shaping what should be proposed and what should be funded. Specifically, I argue we should seek to account for, rather than deny, throwntogetherness. Indeed, we should aim to recognize that the purposeful interacts with

the accidental during desk-based research (for example, when one intends to find a book on a particular topic, say, but discovers another that happens to become even more useful) *and* in the field. The following three examples from my fieldwork in South Africa should help to clarify my points here.

My field experiences in South Africa

'Positionality', which Schuermans and Newton discuss elsewhere in this special collection, entails navigating accidental or chaotic relations during field research. The researcher cannot predict how identity politics will come into play, but in social science research, it *will* (Haraway, 1988; Couples, 2002; Chacko, 2004; Sundberg, 2005; Rose, 2007). One critical way this mattered for me was when I met Afrikaner respondents, many of whom liked Scottish people because they believed Scots disliked English people as much as they did. Upon entering their farm or their house, I was welcomed just that little bit more warmly than might have happened if I had been born in England, just 90 miles to the south. This accidental connection -- something that was thrown into the mix by the events and processes of the Boer War, which occurred a century before I arrived in South Africa -- helped make the interviews go just that little bit better than they might have. Thus, like Massey's notion of the accidental combining with the purposeful to produce space, the throwntogether spatial politics of positionality helped to 'produce' my study; helped make what I wanted to do 'feasible'.

A second way throwntogetherness mattered emerged half way through my field work when I applied to funding agencies for additional support. I wrote two proposals from South Africa; thankfully, one was successful. At the time, writing the proposals was a major

distraction from the interviews I wanted to complete. But looking back at that critical moment, I now recognize how valuable it was to spend considerable time critically analyzing work I had already completed, for example interview transcripts, and just thinking in detail about the relations I was trying to understand. Writing the proposals pushed me to sharpen my empirical and theoretical focus. This, then, was a second way my research entailed a throwing together of action, ideas, and hesitations that stemmed from the deliberate thinking-through of what I believed needed to be done *and* the accidental and the chance that applying for funding entails.

A final example of the throwntogetherness of research is about the 'pressure to publish', which I suggest makes a difference to practices in the field (and more generally, as Houghton and Bass discuss elsewhere in this special collection). The pressure on Doctoral students to 'collect' materials that can lead to publications -- not just for their dissertation -- is structural in origin, but it is a *contingent* part of the contemporary research process: it happens to matter but need not be so important. But knowing that publishing *does* matter can affect what happens during fieldwork. Consider here that, in the midst of conducting interviews with white farmers, I was invited to attend a 'farm security weekend'. I knew it would be tangential to my studies but I also thought it might expose me to some experiences that would help me understand aspects of life in the area. The event entailed forms of military-style interaction that took me out of my comfort zone and activities that were alien to anything I had done before. But I chose to attend, partly with the idea that 'there might be material for a paper in this'. I was right (see Fraser, 2010: 340-344). Something that stood out from these interactions was a comment one of the organizers said. I had already interviewed him before the event and so I knew a lot about his situation and

stance, but towards the end of the event he said to me, knowing that I was interested in the land reform process and the role of white farmers like him in that process, 'I don't want to leave here; I love this place.' His commitment to the place, his determination to stay there, struck me because the whole process of land reform I was researching hinged on sufficient numbers of white farmers taking a completely opposite stance. The government's idea was for white farmers to move on, not for them to indulge their love of South Africa as a whole or their particular localities. Insights such as I gleaned from that conversation are germane to the research process; they become central to the task of stitching -- or 'weaving' (Law, 2004) -- together research materials 'collected' in the field with ideas from the literature. And insofar as they are often the product of purposeful action interacting with the accidental, they reflect the importance of recognizing the role of throwntogetherness in the research process.

Throwntogetherness elsewhere in the tropics

The above examples demonstrate how field research entails weaving together what we plan to do in the field with accidents, chance, the happenstance. Throwntogetherness matters in the research process. This general point has applicability when we consider the process of conducting field research elsewhere in the tropics. As Power and Sidaway (2004: 588) note, for example, among the key beginning points for research on the tropics was Pierre Gourou's *accidental* discovery of the potential for research on the tropics when he fell ill on a mission to Dakar in 1945 and spent his convalescence studying material on tropical societies. Other, more contemporary work in the tropics supports this point. Consider some recent work published in this journal. Chacko (2004: 56), for example, noted that, "at the local well, where women congregated to wash clothes, draw water or bathe at dusk [she

was] able to obtain a depth of understanding that would have eluded [her had she been restricted] to formal data gathering procedures". Such unscripted chance occurrences provide opportunities to learn and understand, as Tan-Mullins (2007: 355) also found about bribing practices during night trips with Thai fishermen.

But even before starting fieldwork, and as Raghuram and Madge (2006: 276) point out, the accidental throwntogetherness of research matters, for example as researchers balance their real interests against ensuring their intended tropical fieldwork fits within whatever might be the conceptual 'flavours of the month'. Likewise, the potential for fruitful collaborations between researchers and development organizations (DOs) in and around the tropics entails maximizing the gains that might flow from chance intersections of hitherto unrelated trajectories, as can happen, for example, when researchers and DOs find ways to work together and share knowledge (Moseley, 2007). Thus, much as we might like the modernist idea of mapping out our research processes before we begin fieldwork and sticking to that expected path, the throwntogetherness of space and place, to which Massey (2005) calls our attention, can interfere with our plans and take us into uncharted -- yet possibly resource-rich -- terrain.

The implications of recognizing throwntogetherness

So what difference might it make if we recognize the throwntogetherness of research? Let me end the paper by focusing on funding agencies. According to Laudel (2006), many funding processes are based on the 'quality-only assumption', that is, "that the best proposals or the best researchers are winning in the competitive grant application game [which] implies that non-quality related conditions do not distort the quality-based

distribution of funds" (Laudel, 2006: 375-76). Unfortunately but certainly not surprisingly, many researchers lose out as a result of what Laudel (2006: 398) calls "non-quality-related 'competitive disadvantages'", such as unbalanced teaching loads among academics, exclusion from informal networks, or not working in the 'right' institution. In contrast, "scientists who are well-known in their community for their (good) research and who are integrated into informal networks and into decision-making processes have an advantage in getting funds" (pp.390-91). Thus, rather than building funding processes that lock-in quality, Laudel's work demonstrates that quality is *not* all that matters.

Despite this, most, if not all agencies seek to *produce* the 'quality myth' via claims about how they judge quality, including efforts to emphasize 'feasibility'. But as I have tried to demonstrate above, feasibility in research processes is not divorced from the accidental and chance occurrences that inevitably make a difference in the research process. Rather, what makes a project feasible is not just what is planned but what *emerges*, what gets throwntogether. Refusing to acknowledge the throwntogetherness of research risks yielding proposals that make (unrealistic) claims about certainty. The inherent danger here is that agencies fund 'closed', 'predicted/able' proposals that ignore throwntogetherness. Or as Laudel (2006: 389) argues using data from interviews with physicists in Germany and Australia, that researchers will propose "mainstream, low-risk" work rather than new ideas; or even that they select "'cheap' research in anticipation of what is likely to be funded" (p.393). More broadly, a danger of reproducing the quality myth and refusing to embrace throwntogetherness in CRF is that we create an academic community in which individuals or teams battle for funds, often using 'non-quality-related' weapons, without fully exploring research frontiers.

So what might it mean for funding agencies to embrace throwntogetherness? One possible change would be for agencies to adopt decision-making criteria that balance the existing emphasis on 'feasibility' with a new emphasis on 'anticipating the unexpected'. Agencies could ask researchers a simple question: "How will your research deal with unexpected occurrences?" Such a move would create space for the researcher to consider what difference the open nature of the research process might make; and would entail acknowledging and valuing, rather than evading, the throwntogetherness of research. A second change might be the encouragement of open inquiry via question-led funding criteria, hence reducing the need for researchers to craft 'adaptation strategies' (Laudel, 2006: 389) that strive to make their real interests fit with what agencies say they need. But perhaps throwntogetherness also requires developing a deeper or stretched-out review process in which the interaction between researcher and reviewer does not end with a decision to fund (or not), but rather endures throughout the lifetime of the research in a way that allows reviewers to understand how throwntogetherness might have mattered.

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Figure Legends

Figure 1. *Limpopo Province, South Africa*