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Where Ethnography Breaks Down: The Ethics, Miscommunications, and Failures of My Independent Study Project

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**Where Ethnography Breaks Down: The
Ethics, Miscommunications, and Failures of
My Independent Study Project**

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Abstract

This paper will communicate a thick description and self-reflective critique of the research methods I used while conducting short-term ethnographic fieldwork at an NGO (non-governmental organization) in Rabat, Morocco. The research initially sought to answer the following question: How does the culture of a Moroccan NGO interact with the culture of its target client populations, and how does this impact the power dynamics of the NGO's services? However, the ethical dilemmas of the research caused the question to shift to the following: What went wrong over the course of this short-term ethnography, and why? This paper will address my initial research plan and then problematize my methods in an analytical breakdown of the reasons for their failure. It will touch upon time constraints, communication confusions, and a lack of solid field relationships as the main limitations of my methods. Ultimately, this paper provides a self-reflective critical analysis of my problematic implementation of ethnographic methods in a short-term setting at the foundation in Rabat, Morocco and then seeks to locate these critiques within a discussion ethnographic ethics. Finally, it will provide alternative approaches as a guideline for future Students in International Training (SIT) students who want to conduct short-term ethnography for their own independent study project (ISP).

Reference Codes: Cultural Anthropology, Development Studies, Regional Studies: Middle East and North Africa

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Finally, I am eternally grateful to my apartment mates during this ISP period. Their company, laughter, conversation, food, and support were instrumental in my completion, analysis, and survival of this project. Long live Orangina! Thank you also to all members of our MOR group; you inspire and challenge me every day. Best of luck in all your future endeavors.

~Natasha Shannon

Rabat, Morocco, 2017

INTRODUCTION: A RUDE AWAKENING

“There’s an idea that says that Americans who come here to study Arabic, especially Moroccan Arabic, are people who—I don’t know how you will take this, but—they are people who work with the CIA” (Ikram, personal communication, May 2, 2017). At this comment from Ikram,¹ my stomach drops, twists, and churns as I see all of the gaps in my ethnographic research crack open, falling to pieces in my mind. Every ethics-related bone in my body squirms in discomfort. This project was supposed to be a tame one, a way to learn about service culture while avoiding vulnerable populations, controversial topics, and ethically murky material. Instead, as Ikram continued to express concern for the foundation’s students, many of whom are migrants and refugees, I realized that, despite my adherence to ethical guidelines for human subjects research, much of what I was doing was subject to a host of nuances surrounding global power dynamics that I had failed to take into account. Through my research practices, I was, however indirectly, feeding into a legitimate fear of how the United States’ might wield its powerful influence abroad, possibly using the information from my project without my knowledge, even if I, as Ikram put it, “don’t necessarily agree... [with] how it’s going to be used” (Ikram, personal communication, May 2, 2017).

Prior to this crossroads, my research question was a relatively benign examination of cross-cultural intersections in an NGO service setting. I sought to answer the following question: How does the culture of a Moroccan NGO interact with the culture of its target population, and how does this impact the power dynamics of the NGO’s services? I was interested in this question from both a personal and academic perspective. On one hand, I have conducted prior

¹ All names have been changed to pseudonyms in order to protect anonymity and confidentiality of subjects.

research involving the cross-cultural adaptations of an international service organization, and I was interested in pursuing this theme further. On the other hand, I have considered working with NGOs in the future, and I was interested in exploring the manifestations of cross-cultural communication in such work, particularly as NGOs are increasingly coming under fire for concerns about ethics and effectiveness (Sriskandarajah, 2014). With these motivations in mind, I set out to explore and produce a thick description of the cultural milieu of an English-teaching NGO in Rabat, Morocco in order to answer my research question.

Before the aforementioned interview, I had not truly considered how my research fit into the specifics of global hierarchies and power dynamics. I was aware that my privilege as a white, American woman would of course influence how I perceived the environment around me, just as it in turn would influence how the people in such an environment perceived me and my research, but I remained blissfully unaware of the depth of the fear-based aspect of such perceptions up until this point. However, the moment I began to discuss these aspects of my project with Ikram gave me pause to reflect upon the growing ethical concerns I had felt building up for some time. Could I in good conscience make any claims about the Crossroads Foundation² and the cultural microcosms of its English courses after such a short time and such a convoluted establishment of my project at such a site? The answer seemed painfully clearer each day: no, I could not. Thus, I eventually came to the conclusion that what I was truly learning from this experience had little to do with the research question I had first set out to answer. In fact, the new questions that plagued my research experience were: Why did my research feel so ethically uncomfortable? What went wrong, and how?

² This has been changed to a pseudonym in order to maintain confidentiality of the organization.

This paper will seek to address the above questions through a critical self-examination of my research methods, including my prior assumptions about fieldwork in Morocco and my approaches to integrating myself at the foundation. Throughout this paper, I will argue that the shortcomings of my ethnography are primarily due to my mis-navigation of my outsider status, including time shortages, a lack of effective communication, and the missing establishment of solid, trusting relationships. I will begin my discussion with a literature review, which will ground my analysis in prior discussions of short-term ethnography and its challenges as well as existing examinations of fieldwork difficulties specific to Morocco. Following my literature review, I will describe in detail my research methods, touching on my reasoning and assumptions behind them. In the next section, I will provide a brief overview of ethnographic ethics and their importance before diving into my full analysis. My analysis, in a departure from the standard anthropological weaving of ethnographic data into a thick description of cultural phenomena, will instead provide thick description through a self-reflexive critique of my research methods. I will analyze the ethical complications of my research approach and the essential aspects of ethnographic fieldwork that failed to fully materialize in the duration of my project. In addition to this analysis, I will discuss some of the ways in which I could and should have refined my research approach in order to avoid some of the ethical dilemmas that I encountered. Finally, after describing possible alternatives, I will conclude with a brief examination of how my experiences and challenges can serve as a learning experience and general roadmap for future Students in International Training (SIT) students conducting ethnographically-grounded independent study projects (ISPs) in Morocco.

LITERATURE REVIEW: THE MISSING BACKGROUND

As my research focus shifted from an outward exploration to a more inward, self-reflective examination, the bulk of the literature I will draw on for this analysis will focus on the intricacies of ethnographic methods and their particularities in both short-term and Moroccan settings. My initial literature review was sadly lacking; instead of grounding my methods in an examination of existing literature about the challenges specific to short-term ethnography, I simply looked into the NGO-specific challenges of ethnography. Over the course of my analysis, however, I have discovered a wealth of literature to draw on in critique of my methods, literature that would have proved useful in directing my ethnographic fieldwork had I discovered it earlier. However, it will now assist me in conducting a thorough and self-reflexive critical analysis of the ethnographic methods that I did employ. To accomplish this analysis, I will rely on the book *Encountering Morocco: Fieldwork and Cultural Understanding* by Rachel Newcomb and David Crawford to provide background context for certain types of difficulties that research in Morocco entails. This collection of essays illuminates a variety of research perspectives that will prove useful in my examination of my own research perspective and practices. This piece of literature will help me in locating my analysis of my research methods within a specific setting, one that poses its own unique challenges.

Additionally, I will draw on literature that addresses ethnography as a form of research more generally. This literature first includes an article by Bahira Sherif, entitled *The ambiguity of boundaries in the fieldwork experience: Establishing rapport and negotiating insider/outsider status*. This article's explanation of the challenges the author faced in integrating into the ethnographic field will serve as useful background for analyzing the challenges of rapport and

outsiderness that I faced in my own field. In combination with this article, *Short-Term Ethnography: Intense Routes to Knowing* by Sarah Pink and Jennie Morgan will also help me in delving into what a successful short-term ethnography looks like, enabling me to compare and contrast my own research experience with their suggestions. In the same vein, *Preparing for the Field by Topics: A Systems Theory Inspired Strategy for Improving Social Access* by Michael Grothe-Hammer will provide yet another framework for critiquing my ethnographic methods. This article suggests ways to improve researcher-informant interactions upon arrival in the field, several of which relate strongly to my own field experiences at the foundation in Rabat. Pink and Morgan's article above also complements these suggestions, as their tailoring of analysis to short-term ethnographic settings matches the timeline of my own field.

As a general reference for ethnographic and anthropological ethics, I will lean on the extensive descriptions and prescriptions of the European Commission's *Research Ethics in Ethnography/Anthropology* by Dr. Ron Iphofen AcSS. Complementing this will be *Ethnography/ethics*, a more philosophical examination of ethical ethnographic methods by Michael Parker that will support the information gleaned from the European Commission. The entirety of this literature will also serve as an excellent framework for my reflection on what alternative methods and approaches would have constructed my ethnography in a more positive manner. Ultimately, although my ethnography was not the success I had hoped, I believe that this in-depth, self-reflexive critique can serve as an example of how the theoretical literature on the subjects of short-term ethnographies and anthropological research in Morocco applies in an on-the-ground, concrete context.

METHODS: A ROCKY FOUNDATION

As an avid student of anthropology, I planned to approach the question of cultural intersections of a service organization from an ethnographic perspective. In-depth ethnographic research comprises anthropology's cornerstone; it involves "understand[ing] people's perception of reality, how they see things and what they consider to be important in life" (Jaimangal-Jones, 2014). To move towards this level of understanding, ethnographers use methods of informant interviews and participant observation, the latter of which especially requires the researcher to spend lengthy amounts of time in the field while becoming "active within the culture" (Jaimangal-Jones, 2014, p. 40-1). This in-depth fieldwork allows for the development of relationships with informants as well as a deeper understanding of what the researcher observes during the time spent in the field.

With these anthropological tenets in mind, I planned to establish a relationship with one NGO in Rabat in order to direct and focus my participant observation on a single fieldsite. To facilitate this relationship, I searched for an organization with which I could volunteer, thus providing a short-term service that would both legitimize my presence in the field and also serve as a small form of labor exchange in return for the chance to conduct ethnographic research within the organization. I planned to discuss my project in detail with the organization in order to establish the research motivations for my visits. One of my goals was to use the volunteer-based interaction to build a foundation for relationships with the employees and clients of the NGO in order to establish rapport and opportunities for in-depth interviews. My other goal was to spend as much time with the NGO as possible, given that the time period scheduled for my research was a mere four weeks. As ethnographic studies are typically at least a year in length, four weeks

cuts barely a sliver of time in the world of ethnographic research (Pink & Morgan, 2013). I wanted to incorporate as many opportunities for participant observation as possible into my project in order to make up for this lack of time.

In order to accomplish these goals, I spoke to a representative of Thaqafat, an organization located in Rabat that works to connect volunteers with Moroccan NGOs (The Thaqafat association.). I described what I wanted to accomplish with my project, explaining that I was looking for an organization that would be comfortable with me simultaneously volunteering and conducting research. At this point, I had not yet decided with which type of NGO I wanted to focus my study. I was open to a wide variety of organizations, and I assumed that it would be simplest to follow-up with whichever NGO was most open to accepting me as a short-term dual volunteer/researcher. When I spoke with the Thaqafat representative, she suggested an English-teaching volunteer opportunity. I immediately agreed; not only was I simply excited to have a promising lead on a possible organization, I thought working with an English-teaching NGO would provide an excellent opportunity for me to make my native language skills useful while also diving in-depth into my research project. I also assumed that since it was the first avenue that the Thaqafat representative suggested, teaching English would be the easiest route to volunteering, and I was more than happy to follow her advice.

After a translated call using the contact information that the Thaqafat representative sent me, I was instructed by the organization to visit Crossroads Foundation in person and ask about talking to a member of the administration who spoke English. I began my research period by following these instructions, venturing to the foundation and discussing the possibility of my project with an administrator, Youssef. He seemed to be on board with the idea of me

volunteering to help teach English, but he was a bit unclear when I asked about the possibility of conducting research. He asked for a description of my project, which I sent to him over email, along with my availability and some personal information he had also requested. I assumed he would reply in the coming days, but I did not get a definitive answer that week.

Mentally berating myself for assuming that email would be a consistent form of communication, I visited Crossroads Foundation in person again the next week. Apparently, Youssef had misunderstood my email with regards to my availability, but once I explained that I was free during the entire week, he gave me the schedule of several English courses, and I arranged to come in during these times. In hindsight, I realized that I had not mentioned my project to him again, tacitly assuming that he had read my email and approved the description I had sent him, since he was open in scheduling for me to visit Crossroad's English courses.

Another assumption that pervaded my interaction with Youssef was the assumption that he was in communication with the employees teaching English at the foundation. I assumed that once he had assisted me in discovering which English courses I could attend, he had then contacted the English teachers about my assisting with and observing their courses. This assumption about the administrative communication within the foundation was one that would frustrate me throughout my entire research period.

When I arrived the next day, the English teacher, Ikram, had no idea who I was or why I was there, and I had to contact Youssef in order to get permission to remain in the classroom. Once admitted, I sat at the back of the classroom without a proper introduction to Ikram or the students, as I felt I had already disrupted the class enough and wanted to remain as unintrusive as possible. Once the course was over, I walked up to Ikram and explained a bit more about who I

was and what I wanted to accomplish. I felt much better about this second interaction, and inquired briefly about the possibility of an interview with her, which seemed a promising prospect. During this course and the courses afterwards, I sat out of the way and for the most part simply observed, chipping in when Ikram asked for my assistance in correcting students' work or to give some explanations or examples as a native speaker. These courses formed the bulk of my participant observation, and I gleaned the most information from the time I spent in the classroom, particularly as I was not otherwise physically present at the foundation. To keep track of all the ethnographic data I gathered, I recorded my observations in extensive fieldnotes after each visit to the Crossroads Foundation, later drawing upon these for details in my analysis.

In addition to observation, I also hoped to use the English courses as a springboard for more in-depth interactions with other Crossroads employees, given that, in accordance with the ethical guidelines for human subjects research, I would not be interviewing the vulnerable populations for whom Crossroads provides classes. However, few personal connections materialized, and the interview possibilities that did materialize were plagued by inconsistent communication and a general confusion about the existence and substance of my project. I became increasingly concerned about the ethical ramifications of my research project, as I became more and more aware that my project and my purpose at Crossroads had neither been communicated by Youssef from the administration nor properly explained by me, the researcher. My discomfort with my own research approach grew, and I eventually came to the conclusion that I was not conducting ethnography in the full spirit of informed consent that shapes ethnographic ethics, nor was I maintaining a thoughtful awareness of my own positionality as an American researcher abroad amidst a global structure of power dynamics. However, by this time

it was too late to start my entire project again from scratch. Thus, I chose to flip the script and use my fumbled research project as a learning experience and an opportunity to self-reflect on ways to improve my ethnographic methods in the future.

ANALYSIS: MISHAPS AND WRONG TURNS

Throughout my time as an anthropology student, countless courses, readings, and professors have impressed upon me the importance of ethnography for anthropological research. Ethnography's importance stems from its dedication to understanding and portraying cultures under study from their own perspective (Jaimangal-Jones, 2014); it was this search for deep understanding, the desire "to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar" (Spiro, 1990), that first drew me to anthropology. However, with the weighty task of ethnography comes the even more weighty ethical responsibilities to the populations that the ethnography seeks to describe. Ethnographic ethics are founded on principles of informed consent and non-exploitative relationships between the researcher and the researched, with the well-being of participants always taking precedence over the ethnographic project itself (Iphofen, 2015; Jaimangal-Jones, 2014; Parker, 2007). For ethnographers, adhering to these principles becomes a delicate and intricate process, as each new situation within the fieldsite requires a new examination of one's own ethical positionality with regards to the field and participants.

To navigate this shifting landscape in an ethical manner, ethnographers employ a variety of tactics, such as utilizing "negotiation forms of consent" that evolve with the field (Parker, 2007) or carving out communicative space between ethnographer and participants amidst relational boundaries that are "entrenched and yet constantly shifting" (Sherif, 2001). Whatever

the tactics, the ethical ethnographer remains committed to “protecting the autonomy, wellbeing, safety and dignity of all research participants,” despite the difficulties of knowing what each of these concepts means and looks like during the day-to-day conducting of ethnographic research (Iphofen, 2015). In the following sections of my paper, I will break down the ethical issues of my own ethnography into three parts, addressing each shortcoming in a thorough dissection of my methods with regards to the ethical principles outlined above. I will begin with a discussion of time constraints, move to an examination of communication issues, and then analyze how both of these affected my ability to create positive, trusting relationships with participants. Finally, I will close by considering possible alternative research approaches that I could have taken in order to produce an ethical and successful short-term ethnography.

A Month of Scrambling: The Time Constraints of My Short-term Ethnography

The overarching time structure of my research project was designed by the outside force of my SIT study abroad program; each student in the program was allotted four weeks to complete an independent research project of their choice. Prior to beginning this research period, I was aware that four weeks was nowhere close to the typical, year-long period of time in the fieldsite that most PhD ethnographers dedicate to complete a study (Pink & Morgan, 2013). Despite this atypical timeline, I was confident that there remained plenty of anthropological knowledge to gather, even if it would not prove to be as extensive an analysis as that of a long-term study. I hoped to make the most of even this short amount of time by staying true to the anthropological strategies of participant observation and ethnographic fieldwork.

Although I remained woefully unaware of their official existence for much of my research period, short-term ethnographies are, in fact, an established category of ethnographic research. Pink and Morgan introduce short-term ethnography in the following way:

“[E]thnography is not always characterized through long-term engagement with other people's lives. Rather it involves intensive excursions into their lives, which use more interventional as well as observational methods to create contexts through which to delve into questions that will reveal what matters to those people in the context of what the researcher is seeking to find out.” (Pink & Morgan, 2013)

This description would have been vastly useful to me had I discovered it earlier. However, my first mistake when confronting the time crunch dilemma, as briefly mentioned in my literature review, was not conducting an exploration into the background literature surrounding short-term ethnography. I was blissfully unaware of its existence as a distinct field, and consequently trusted that I could simply rely on the familiar strategies of participant observation and in-depth interviews to gather enough ethnographic information. I knew instinctively that I needed to spend as much time on-site as possible, but I did not consider ways to otherwise adapt my research strategies to further compensate for my lack of time.

The other dimension of the time challenge was that of the time within those four short weeks that I actually spent at my fieldsite. After establishing an initial relationship with Crossroads, as described above in the methods section, I traveled to the foundation roughly three times a week to attend classes and help out in whatever capacity possible. Ideally, I would have been at the foundation at least five days a week for lengthy stretches at a time. As it was, I spent about three and a half hours on Tuesdays and Thursdays sitting in two back-to-back English

courses and about two hours on Friday for a single course, as these were the scheduled classes that my initial administrative contact, Youssef, encouraged me to attend. Spending additional time at the Crossroads Foundation was further complicated by travel; it took me roughly forty-five minutes to get from my home to the foundation each time I visited. This commute meant that I could not easily drop by the foundation to make my face more familiar, and as the scheduled English courses provided the only legitimate reason for my presence, I committed myself only to spending those stretches of time at Crossroads, despite their limited duration.

These time constraints, on both the weekly and daily level, caused problems for my ethnography in several ways. Firstly, I was limited in how much time I could afford to spend in preemptive logistical contact with the Crossroads Foundation, as I was eager to get my study off the ground as quickly as possible and did not lay thorough groundwork when initiating my relationship with the foundation. Secondly, once I did receive permission to visit, the only significant blocks of time I spent at Crossroads consisted of the English courses. In turn, this scheduling meant that the only people I consistently came into contact with at the foundation were those involved in the English courses or the one employee at the reception desk, Jamila, who often assisted me in figuring out logistics of the English courses. It often felt as if I was nothing more than a passerby, dropping in for a few hours to say a quick hello and jot down a few notes, a feeling that goes strongly against the grain of ethnography. Ethnographic methods hold that “the researcher must engage in various levels of cultural participation and become active within the culture” (Jaimangal-Jones, 2014), and the temporal nature of my interactions with and at the Crossroads Foundation made the experience feel quite the opposite: disengaged

and forced. Instinctively, I was wary of how negatively I was reflecting upon my research experience as a whole.

“Disengaged” and “forced” are the last adjectives with which I wanted to describe my ethnographic project, but the realization that this was indeed how it felt and appeared to me gave me pause to consider the ethical implications of such personal reactions. In hindsight, my ethnographic research evidently fell into the category of what Jeffrey and Troman refer to as “compressed time mode,” where “researchers inhabit a research site almost permanently for anything from a few days to a month” (Jeffrey & Troman, 2004). Unaware of this category at the time of my project, I simply attempted to cram the necessary ethnographic sessions of “hanging around” and observing as many details as possible into the short chunks of class time I spent at my fieldsite (Jeffrey & Troman, 2004). As the time I was scheduled to be in the field was already structured around this formal classroom setting, “hanging around” in a more informal manner proved extremely difficult. I was not spending the concentrated amounts of time at my fieldsite required by the short-term nature of my ethnography, and thus it was at least halfway through my research period by the time I was a familiar face to the reception desk at the foundation (Grothe-Hammer, 2017; Jeffrey & Troman, 2004; Pink & Morgan, 2013). This unfamiliarity, as well as my status as a ill-informed outsider, made it difficult to establish rapport with possible informants, as requesting interviews became an odd transgression of sorts across the uncertain relational boundaries that existed between me and the informants (Sherif, 2001).

The problems of self-limiting my time to the foundation’s scheduled English courses was further compounded by the Moroccan cultural settings within which the foundation operates. This Moroccan NGO exhibited scheduling variations that I was unaccustomed with, given my

prior familiarity with the cultural West's style of a working day. As a result, I found my opportunities to establish a deeper relationship with Youssef, my first contact at Crossroads, constrained. The chances of finding him at the foundation were minimal during his lunch break, which ended at the same time English classes began, and I was initially informed that, to speak with administration, I should visit the foundation either around 10:00 a.m. or after 2:00 p.m.

Though I obviously could have come in during the morning to speak with Youssef, I was also conscious of how the time I spent at the foundation could detract from the working time of not only Youssef, but also other informants who were Crossroads employees. Although the working time that I did observe while at Crossroads often appeared quiet, laid-back, and not at all busy, this appearance of free time may not have truly been the case. Rignall writes about this type of non-busy atmosphere in Morocco and the "temporality of life in the margins," explaining that the appearance to a cultural Westerner of "lost productivity" of time spent waiting or engaging in social activities does not in fact make this time "idle" (Crawford & Newcomb, 2013, p. 50-52). I often saw this exhibited at the foundation, as the quiet times of the midday break and the main room full of the foundation's seated clients had only the appearance of "nothing actually happen[ing]" (Crawford & Newcomb, 2013, p. 50). In actuality, the clients were busy people. Many were so absorbed by the intricacies of everyday life that they did not have the time to be consistent, repeat students in the English courses, and Ikram also had another job teaching at a local high school, simply picking up extra hours at Crossroads throughout the week (Ikram, personal communication, May 2, 2017). Amidst all this activity, my own inactive, foreign presence as an observing researcher felt as if I was already intruding into Crossroad's schedule.

Remaining cognizant of the time requirements of the members of my fieldsite, I distinctly felt that I had neither the right to intrude on this space for “people’s ‘work’ in unexpected places and times” (Crawford & Newcomb, 2013, p. 53), nor had I played my cards correctly in order to have the deeper relationships required to request such an intrusion (Sherif, 2001). I did not successfully navigate the relational aspects of the NGO’s cultural microcosm and could not fully justify the deep but distracting engagement of informants required by ethnography during hours of their valuable time (Grothe-Hammer, 2017; Jeffrey & Troman, 2004; Pink & Morgan, 2013). My research at times felt like “drive-by” ethnography, as my project remained caught in the paradox of not spending enough time at the foundation to establish solid relationships with possible informants, but also not having deep enough relationships with informants to legitimize further intruding upon their time.

The Pitfalls of Assuming: Communication Difficulties of My Short-term Ethnography

Even despite these time-related limitations, I may have been able to successfully navigate the short-term aspect of my ethnography had the communication both within the NGO and between me and the foundation flowed in a more positive manner. The ethnographic essential of communication can not be taken lightly; it remains so important for social access in the field that there are a wide range of distinct strategies developed in order to facilitate in-depth communication between ethnographer and informants (Grothe-Hammer, 2017). Short-term ethnographers “often need to intervene in peoples’ lives in new ways that are intensive, potentially intrusive, and involve asking what they might think are irrelevant questions,” none of which can be accomplished without consistent, open, and positive communication (Pink &

Morgan, 2013). Positive, open communication builds the foundations for participants' informed consent to ethnographic research in order to preserve their dignity and safety (Iphofen, 2015).

As diversity and variety exist not only between fieldsites but also within a single fieldsite, emerging between the members of a fieldsite, the different times spent at the fieldsite, and the constantly shifting relationships between the researcher and the researched, the ethnographer's communication styles must change appropriately to ethically incorporate and accommodate such difference (Iphofen, 2015). As this type of quality communication comprises both the precursor and substance of field relationships, my communication mishaps severely damaged the efficacy and ethics of my project. Throughout my ethnographic fieldwork at the foundation, my awareness of certain communication necessities and my ability to accordingly adjust to these situations were strongly and negatively impacted by the time constraint discussed above as well as several erroneous assumptions that I held about the way the foundation operated. Again, as with the time factors, I did not examine in-depth the measures I needed to take to compensate for communication challenges prior to beginning my project.

As previously mentioned in my methods, the first direct communication I had with the Crossroads Foundation was my initial visit to ask about the possibility of me volunteering while also conducting research. My meeting with Youssef, the administrator, was first complicated by a slight language barrier; he spoke English, but not fluently, so it was difficult to gauge how much of our conversation was mutually understood. I prefaced my inquiry with a brief explanation of my status as a study abroad student with the Center for Cross-Cultural Learning in the old medina, as the name carries weight in some circles. As I tried to explain my goals in simple, clear, and open terms, Youssef responded most strongly to the aspect of my inquiries that

involved volunteering; he drafted an email to me as I was talking, requesting that I send him my resume, schedule, and a passport photo for what he called an “internship.” I interpreted “internship” as his way of referring to my several-week long volunteer timeline, but I was a bit taken aback, as he had not yet addressed anything concerning my research project. I asked specifically if he thought it would be possible for me to conduct research as well, and he responded by telling me to send him a short description of my project. I of course agreed, and thanked him for his time, returning home to send him the information he requested over email.

In this instance, I assumed that, as Youssef had initiated email contact, email would provide a viable means of communication between me and the Crossroads Foundation. However, this assumption proved too optimistic, as I was not able to receive a definitive answer from Youssef until I returned to the foundation in person to have a face-to-face conversation. Additionally, I had relied on the fact that the text-based aspect of email communication would enable easier understanding on Youssef’s part, as email makes it simpler to revisit a written message for better comprehension. This led to my assumption that Youssef had garnered a full understanding of my research project from the description I emailed him, and also led to my assumption that his assistance with scheduling my visits to the foundation was his form of research permission. When reexamining these assumptions, although I understand the logic behind why I made them, I clearly should have been more forward in explaining my project and ensuring that Youssef did indeed fully understand what I wanted to accomplish during my time at the foundation. Iphofen writes that “[a]nthropological work necessarily requires good understanding of how the different communities being studied prefer to receive information”; clearly I lacked this “good understanding,” or I would have known that email was not the ideal

form of communication and that an in-depth, in-person explanation of my project would have served me much better (Iphofen, 2015).

Unfortunately, my problematic assumptions did not stop with my contact with Youssef, as evidenced by my first visit to the Crossroad's English courses. I arrived at the foundation fifteen minutes early for the 2:00 p.m. class, and as I did not see anyone at the reception desk, I asked a man sitting near me about the English course. He mentioned that it began at 2:00 p.m., and since it was already 2:00 p.m., I waited along with several others for the instructor to arrive. When the instructor, Ikram, arrived, she strode to the classroom with a legion of students behind her, and I timidly followed behind. As everyone was settling in, I approached Ikram and mentioned that I was a student and I had spoken to Youssef about visiting and helping out with the course. To my surprise, she had no idea to what I was referring, and quickly dismissed me from her class. I was confused and shaken, as my prior meeting with Youssef had seemed so promising. Eventually, I ended up contacting Youssef by phone, using a security guard who knew my face as a intermediary between Youssef and Ikram, and after hearing from them, she acquiesced, although she told me I could stay for this one time only.

Needless to say, this was not a positive communication experience. At the time, I wished I could have engaged in a more lengthy conversation with Ikram, diving into what I was doing at the foundation, fully explaining my project and my desire to volunteer. However, not wanting to create further distraction than I had already caused, I quickly agreed to her limitations and made myself scarce at the back of the room. I observed the class, jotting down observations about the space, people, and interactions. After the class ended, I once again approached Ikram, this time determined to make a better impression. Students were flowing in and out of the classroom, so I

made my introduction fairly short, focusing on the main points: I was a student, I was trying to complete a project about the Crossroads Foundation, and I wanted to be in her class to learn more about the English courses at the foundation and help out if possible.

Ikram seemed much warmer this time around, and I was encouraged by her answers to my few brief questions, so I asked if it would be alright for me to come to her class again next week. In other words, I was, if unwittingly, engaging in one of what Parker refers to as “‘negotiation’ approaches to informed consent” (Parker, 2007). Of course, a host of delicate ethical issues accompany the employment of “‘negotiated” consent (Parker, 2007), but I could not help but think that, had Youssef communicated information about my presence to Ikram, I would not be in this precarious position. This thought was reinforced by her response to my question, saying that I would need to speak to Youssef, which I had of course already done. Not until later did I learn that Ikram was not a full-time employee of the foundation, which likely complicated the chain of communication between her and Youssef. Though I picked up on the disjointed nature of the foundation’s communication, I remained not-so-blissfully unaware of which method was actually best for communicating between the various participants I found myself interacting with at my fieldsite. Much like the importance of background research on acceptable “‘topics for communication” for conducting short-term ethnography, this understanding of the appropriate and effective routes of communication at the foundation was an essential piece of knowledge for my ethnography that I neglected to sufficiently explore before diving headfirst into my project (Grothe-Hammer, 2017). Both my ignorance of this challenge and the shortness of the time period available for me to address this challenge before beginning my project in earnest are to blame, but the ultimate result was an extremely uncomfortable first experience

with the foundation's English courses. I was able to eventually come into Ikram's class regularly, but this initial interaction stayed with me throughout my time at Crossroads.

If I had subconsciously thought at this point that my uncomfortable interactions with participants unaware of the reasons for my presence at the foundation were over, I was to be sorely disappointed. Two weeks into my project, I asked the receptionist, Jamila, with whom I had consistently interacted with, if it would be possible to interview her. She agreed, but the next day, she walked up to me and hesitantly began to ask me if I was writing an article. I quickly explained that no, I was doing a project about the English courses of the NGO, thrown for yet another loop as I realized she, like Ikram, was initially unaware that I was conducting research. Jamila asked me who had given me permission to do such a project, and when I told her I had spoken to Youssef, she relaxed visibly. The whole encounter felt ethically uncomfortable, as the ethnographic principle of informed consent required Jamila to "have been given enough information about the research for [her] to know what [her] participation would involv[e]," and I doubted that my brief explanation of my project set her much more at ease (Iphofen, 2015).

Again, I had made the mistake of assuming Youssef would communicate the dual purposes of my presence to the foundation's staff. Both Ikram and Jamila knew Youssef, as I had mentioned him several times during conversations with both of them and they were immediately familiar with his name, but apparently I and my emailed research description had not made enough of an impression on him to merit notifying other staff members. Whether this was a reflection of Youssef forgetting about my research, an oversight amidst his busy schedule, or a pure lack of communication, the fact remained that my entire research period was clouded by an unintentional lack of transparency. Additionally, this lack of transparency ultimately trickled

down to the English students themselves; because their teacher, Ikram, was not always fully aware of my project and what it entailed, they were also unaware of the joint reasons for me observing and assisting with their classes. Although their status as possibly vulnerable populations (many were refugees or migrants) prevented me from using them as participants in my ethnographic research, I still spent a decent amount of time in their classes, and would have liked to be up front about my project. As it was, the faces of the Crossroads Foundation and the faces of those visiting Crossroads were so constantly changing that I was under the impression that students assumed I was merely another temporary assistant teacher.

Transparent communication comprises one of the founding principles of informed consent. Iphofen writes the following of the relationship between communication and consent:

“Gaining consent cannot easily be separated from the giving of information. Subjects should be able to choose ‘freely’ to participate in research. They should have been given enough information about the research for them to know what their participation involves. In anthropological studies participants’ consent may have to be treated as ongoing throughout the research engagement. Consent should be gained in the most convenient, least disturbing manner for both researcher and researched.” (Iphofen, 2015)

When applying this method of informed consent to the above descriptions of my communication difficulties, I cannot but conclude that I did not attain properly informed consent of many of the possible informants at the foundation. Even Ikram, to whom I had explained my research project, was unsettled during my interview with her, as she did not understand the purpose of my study or my motivations for even so much as studying abroad in Morocco. It was ultimately my discussion with her that led me to discard the project entirely in favor of a self-reflection on the

ethics of my ethnographic research. Ultimately, reflecting on my communication approaches make me disappointed that I did not take a more assertive stance as a researcher to fully communicate the purpose, goals, and motivations of my ethnographic project.

Friend or Foe? Relationship Difficulties of My Short-term Ethnography

Both the time constraints and communication barriers of my ethnographic project combined to sabotage one of the most important facets of ethnographic research, that of solid, trusting relationships with research participants. “Managing the ‘trust’ relationship between researchers and researched is vital,” as communication with informants provides the main route for gathering ethnographic data (Iphofen, 2015). This in-depth communication comes in the form of participant observation, a research method which forms the backbone of ethnography and requires establishing deep, informative relationships with research participants (Grothe-Hammer, 2017; Iphofen, 2015; Jaimangal-Jones, 2014; Parker, 2007; Pink & Morgan, 2013; Sherif, 2001). It was my original hope that volunteering would provide a legitimizing route for establishing such in-depth relationships with the members of the foundation, but as it turned out, my lack of time and miscommunications simply made this dual status as both a researcher and a volunteer more confusing for everyone involved.

To begin with, any strong relationship requires time and effort; this remains no less true in a research setting. As previously and extensively discussed, however, time was the scarcest resource during my research period. Not only did I not spend enough time at Crossroads to merit extensive conversations outside of the occasional hello and formalized discussions of logistical matters, my interactions with possible informants were often characterized by a rushed desire to

complete the conversation in order to return to other work at hand. Thus, most of my time at Crossroads that fell outside of scheduled English courses was spent alone at a table in the main room, waiting for the courses to begin, as they usually began a bit late. My status as an outsider negatively affected my ability to establish rapport in the field, as I was unsure how to navigate “the ambiguity of boundaries between researchers and the ‘researched’” in this situation (Sherif, 2001). I was aware of my outsider status as a visiting researcher, one who was simply fortunate to be given the chance to be at the foundation at all, and I did not begin building personal relationships with the NGO’s employees until well into my research period. Only in the finishing stages of my four-week ethnographic exploration did I start to feel an increased connection between me and the members of the foundation who were now semi-familiar with my name and face. Of course, by this time it was too late to incorporate this growing rapport into my ethnographic study, particularly as this was also the stage at which I was questioning the ethical foundation of my study.

The ethical questions surrounding my poor negotiations of informed consent also affected the quality of my relationships in the field. It was clear from the start that Ikram was suspicious of my purpose at the foundation, as evidenced by her initial refusal to allow me in her class. As time went on, I could feel this tension giving way to a more accepting relationship, as she worked to incorporate my help into the classroom more. However, once I began conducting a formal interview with her, I could feel the “entrenched and yet constantly shifting” boundaries of our relationship becoming more obstructive, due to my status as a Western outsider (Sherif, 2001). Her comments during the interview made me acutely aware of my privilege as a student researcher, versed in the technical aspect of human subjects research ethics but blind to the

implications of a Westerner throwing around the word “research” in a non-Western setting fraught with the fears of a region and population that had long occupied the lower rungs of the global power hierarchies. In my own head, I could rest assured that I would not abuse the ethical research procedures that serve to protect vulnerable populations, especially as my initial research question was not an overly controversial one. Conversely, I had made so many badly miscalculated assumptions in the pursuit of communication about my research at this point that I could not easily allay Ikram’s own fears by referring to our previous negotiation of informed consent; I had simply never given her a thorough enough explanation. Indeed, had I not made the communication blunders I discussed earlier, my entire relationship with Ikram could have started off on a much more positive foot and in turn been characterized by trust rather than suspicion.

To be fair, suspicion of me might not have necessarily been linked solely to my lack of dedication to explaining my project. Katherine Hoffman writes extensively about the role of suspicion in her own Moroccan fieldwork; her research was fraught with suspicion from Moroccans on all sides, particularly as an outside researcher often brings with them connotations of governmental authority and involvement (Crawford & Newcomb, 2013). While it was not the Moroccan government that played role in my own case, as it had in Hoffman’s, the fears raised by Ikram were also with regards to government, this time that of the United States’. It was the Central Intelligence Agency of my home country that Ikram worried would use my research, with or without my consent, to pursue and hurt her refugee students. I was both upset that Ikram was suspicious of me and upset that I had not considered such legitimate fears, unlikely though they were. All Ikram had to rely on to protect her students was my word, something that would have meant a great deal more to her, had I established a more trusting relationship with her from

the beginning of my research period. This interview interaction only further served to enforce my sense that I had severely misnavigated necessary ethical ethnographic practices.

Although this governmental trend did not play out as strongly in the rest of my field relationships, suspicion would have been much easier to alleviate had I spent more quality time at the foundation and exhibited more transparent, assertive communication throughout my entire ethnographic process. As it was, I could feel myself retreating farther and farther away from my project as I continued to experience interactions that reinforced my feeling that I was forcing myself on the foundation and its members. This sense of forcing came from me not presenting to foundation members what my “‘good reasons’ for conducting” ethnographic research actually were (Iphofen, 2015). I increasingly felt that, no matter how “good” my reasons might be, they did not outweigh my ethical blunders, and my research seemed to be fast evolving into me “using” the foundation and its members without their fully informed consent, simply to achieve my own research ends. This stands in harsh contrast to the principles of protecting participants’ dignity and autonomy (Iphofen, 2015). Ultimately, I felt that my lack of trusting relationships, combined with a lack of extensive time and communication meant that I could not in good faith make any substantial or ethical claims about the foundation. As a result, I turned to this paper as a chance to address the errors I made over the course of my ethnographic pursuits.

Could Have, Should Have, Would Have: Alternative Strategies for My Short-term Ethnography

I have spent a great deal of time considering how I would have approached my project differently were I given the chance to begin again, as my complicated relationship with my field and its members often made me feel ethically uncomfortable and sent me spiraling into endless

rounds of “If only I had... .” Therefore, I am dedicating this subsection of my analysis to the alternative approaches I could and should have taken; I hope that such revision, while it cannot change my own project, may serve as a guideline for any future SIT students wishing to conduct short-term ethnography in Morocco.

The first change I would have made to my research methods would have happened far before I ever entered into the field. Instead of exploring the background of organizational ethnographies and the field of NGO studies, I should have dedicated a large amount of time to reading up on short-term ethnography, its specific challenges, and strategies to overcome these challenges. Many of these background readings would have consisted of ones I have cited throughout this paper, as I am retroactively learning about some of the ins and outs of short-term ethnography as its own distinct field.

In this same vein, I should have spent more time getting to know the Crossroads Foundation itself, initiating my contact with them far before my official research period was due to begin. This would have expanded my time constraints slightly, allowing me to lay a more solid foundation for building relationships with members of Crossroads. While of course I could not have begun my research early, I could have at least made myself a familiar face prior to the official start date of my ethnographic study. When I actually did begin my research period, a few background interviews would not have gone amiss; I could have dedicated these interviews to learning more about Crossroads’ unique layout, including its structure, operation, and communication methods. This would have provided a springboard for employing, as Grothe-Hammer suggests, “a foregoing preparation strategy,” gathering data about what topics and avenues of communication would be acceptable and useful for gaining “improv[ed] social

access” to my field (Grothe-Hammer, 2017). I would have then been much better equipped to tailor my relationships with Crossroads participants, improving the quality of my participant observation and in-depth interviews.

In turn, preparation strategies such as this would have better enabled me to make the next necessary change: establishing fuller and more transparent communication between myself and participants in my fieldsite. I would be equipped with prior knowledge about the existing frameworks of communication, and I would not have made such uneducated assumptions about how the foundation operated. Assisted by a prior familiarity with the foundation and some of its characteristics, I would have had more confidence in describing my ethnographic research in full detail, particularly focusing on communicating the academic reach and minimal risks of my proposed project. My face would also not be a strangers’, decreasing the chances of intense suspicion against me and improving the necessary day-to-day negotiations of informed consent (Iphofen, 2015; Parker, 2007). The foundation’s open awareness of my simultaneous volunteer and ethnographer statuses would not only have assisted me in avoiding the aforementioned ethically sticky situations, but could also have led to increased interest in my project and thus increased possibilities for collecting high-quality ethnographic data through a variety of methods. I could have both gathered enough data to make a useful ethnographic claim and also accomplished this without concerns that I was flaunting the human subjects research ethics of informed consent.

With improved communication would have also come more opportunities to legitimize my presence at my fieldsite. Earlier and more transparent contact with the Crossroads Foundation would have avoided limiting my understanding of the English course schedule to a

singular meeting with Youssef. I could have made time to meet with him, Ikram, and Jamila before properly beginning my fieldwork, information from which may have then led to me spending more than only several hours three days a week at Crossroads. Had I dedicated myself earlier to establishing positive, substantial contact with the foundation, I could have explored other activities at Crossroads and arranged for less limited visits to my fieldsite when the four-week research period arrived in full force. I would have been able to throw myself into the participant observation swiftly, immediately building upon previous relational connections to legitimize more personal interactions and open up avenues for spending increased time with informants (Grothe-Hammer, 2017; Iphofen, 2015).

This increased time at the foundation would have then reciprocated in a feedback loop with my field relationships, as more time spent at the fieldsite improves the chances that relationships with informants will become deeper and more ethnographically rich. These relationships would have in turn remove the forced feel of my ethnography, as I would have been able to draw on a sense of insider knowledge, that, while perhaps minimal, might nonetheless have given me different points of entry into the field and garnered different perceptions of me by participants in my fieldsite (Sherif, 2001). Improved, stronger relationships would have further legitimized my demands on participants' time; a more involved relational background would have lent credibility to my desire to record their perspectives for my research project. I would have grown more comfortable in participating in the field, thus making my ethnographic data richer and of more relevance.

All of these self-corrections are much easier to make retroactively, rather than prior to entering the field, but that does not delegitimize their usefulness. If anything, this self-reflexive

analysis will serve me well in the future as I come across new research opportunities accompanied by their own unique challenges. This experience has made me realize the importance of a preemptive critical examination of the ethnographer's fieldsite and project structure and their specific challenges. Additionally, in the future, I will be sure to scrutinize any assumptions I might hold about my fieldsite and my research approaches. Although I can not possibly predict all of my own biases, an increased awareness of one's own positionality always proves useful, particularly in a reflexive field such as ethnography (Iphofen, 2015; Parker, 2007; Sherif, 2001). This paper's own analysis serves this reflexive purpose, challenging me to think deeper about my every engagement in any and all ethnographic encounters.

CONCLUSION: NOTES TO FUTURE ISP ETHNOGRAPHERS

There remains no question that I was unsuccessful in completing an ethical short-term ethnography of this foundation in Rabat, Morocco. Despite my failure, however, this research experience can nonetheless serve as a contribution to the self-reflexive literature surrounding ethnographic methods and the difficulties of the field, particularly as they relate to anthropological endeavors in Morocco. I certainly hope the end result of my ISP will prove useful to future SIT students, should any of them choose to pursue ethnographic endeavors in their own ISPs. It has become abundantly clear to me that intense preparation for the field remains vital for conducting successful short-term ethnographic research. My own shortcomings in navigating time constraints, communication difficulties, and developing relationships provide three distinct categories for future short-term ISP ethnographers to consider. I hope that my thick description and critical analysis of these problematic aspects of my own short-term ethnography

will encourage SIT students to cultivate an increased awareness of their own positionality and its possible effects on their fieldsites and field relationships, allowing them to avoid repeating my grievous mistakes.

On a more personal note, throughout this process, I have come to question a great deal about my abilities, hopes, and future as an ethnographer. This self-analysis, although mentally taxing, provides an excellent opportunity for taking an in-depth look at what I can and wish to accomplish as a student of anthropology in pursuit of ethnographic understanding throughout my life. I will continue to utilize the self-reflexive techniques developed in this paper throughout my future research endeavors, particularly as ethnography remains an ever-shifting field that invites constant revisiting, reexamination, and revision. My ISP's failure simply marks yet another chapter in the volumes of literature documenting ethnographic difficulties and the ethical complications of conducting human subjects research. In the end, the biggest lesson I have learned throughout this chaotic research process remains the importance of ethnographic ethics. The utmost priority of any ethnographic researcher must always be an adherence to the integrity of research ethics, protecting human subjects of ethnography and their fundamental rights to the utmost. If we do not afford human subjects constant respect for their dignity and humanity, our research as ethnographers means nothing at all.

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