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Who's at Risk? Reflections on In/Security When Working With/Through Military Brokers in Conflict Settings

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I reflect upon my experience of working with active military officers-cum-research brokers in research on the Congolese (DRC) armed forces. Drawing upon the traditions of autoethnography and Narrative International Relations, I recount the story of an evolving relationship between one particular military broker and myself. It highlights how military research brokers, while frequently cast not only as capable of handling their own security, but as prime sources of insecurity, often share the general (civilian) research broker's predicaments of insecurity. In doing so, the narrative also challenges dominant gendered, as well as racialized, ideas of who is at risk when conducting research in conflict settings.

The Disquieting News

'Didn't you know? Colonel Mabanga has been in prison for 6 months', whispers Captain Makasi, one of the female administrative staff at the Congolese Ministry of Defense (MoD), to the researcher. The researcher, once again back in the Congo, looks at the other staff in the small reception area at the MoD with an expression of disbelief, waiting for some kind of reaction from the two others in the room. They all nod and confirm: 'Yes, it's true and very sad'. After thankfully accepting the soft drink she is offered, the researcher sits down on one of the white plastic chairs in the reception. Suddenly, the strange phone conversations she had had with Colonel Mabanga over the last 6 months made sense. When she had tried to reach him from Sweden, his voice had sounded different and strained and when she asked if there was something wrong, he had told her that he was on a very stressful work mission across the country. She had thought this strange, as these kinds of long work missions were unusual for the position he held.

Colonel Mabanga was the researcher's first key research broker, whom she met when she embarked on her research project on the Congolese armed forces together with a colleague several years earlier. The project sought to shed light on gender and violence, in particular sexual violence,

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committed by the armed forces. While she initially received a stamped research permit from the Minister of Defense himself (which was a lucky stroke and procured through contacts with a high-level Congolese diplomat), the research permit soon lost its value as the minister was replaced after a year. However, Colonel Mabanga had cast a blind eye to the expired official permit and had continued to assist her after the new minister was appointed.

Only the day before hearing the surprising and disquieting news, the researcher had visited Colonel Mabanga's wife Henriette in their house in the officers' quarters in the big military camp close to the city center. Even Henriette had insisted that Colonel Mabanga was on a mission with his work. Yet, the researcher had sensed that something was wrong. The otherwise cheerful Henriette had lost weight and seemed tense and nervous. The house also seemed much more run-down than the researcher remembered, and several high value pieces of furniture, like the big screen TV, were missing.

While sipping on the warm coke, and chatting with Captain Makasi and the others in the MoD reception, the researcher starts to feel both guilty and scared: Was she the one who had brought this upon Colonel Mabanga? Did someone higher up find out that he had been facilitating her research even though the research permit had expired? Maybe she was also in trouble now for working without a valid permit? Maybe someone had found her and her colleague's most recent research publication on the Internet and disliked it? She asks Captain Makasi and the others what the charges are. They all say that the official charge is corruption. Colonel Mabanga had been accused of tampering with the salary system and the personnel lists. While no one in the office directly challenges that accusation, they all argue that the real reason was that Colonel Mabanga had fallen out of favor. His dismissal and arrest, they surmised, had to do with the President's new practice of filling all important posts with people from his own region. They all lamented that the person replacing Colonel Mabanga, the new boss whom they now had to work for, was an incompetent idiot.

Remembering the Strained Beginnings

A strong sense of empathy with Colonel Mabanga washes over the researcher as she leaves the office and walks through the muddy MoD car park heading to the car, not because she believes that the official accusations are untrue, but because she shares the interpretation shared by Captain Makasi and the others. Clearly, Colonel Mabanga had been outmaneuvered in one of the many power-struggles in the armed forces. Once a powerful and proud man, he had not only lost his position, he was also subject to the shame of imprisonment. The researcher tries to

imagine his new life in the feared prison, which she had visited many times. Surely, he had been placed in the better quarters, she reasons with herself, given his previous position and the fact that he had been able to keep his phone. Nonetheless, the image of the powerful and proud Colonel Mabanga, who was in his 60s, a veteran of the air force, and with years of military training overseas, now in prison is somehow hard to imagine. That both he and his wife had tried to hide it from her for such a long time makes her feel sad.

At the same time, the researcher is puzzled about her feelings, and recalls the first time she met Colonel Mabanga. Who could have imagined that she would ever feel any kind of sympathy for him? They first met in his fancy office, which, like other high-profile offices, appeared out of place in the otherwise hollowed-out and decrepit MoD building. She had disliked him intensely. Colonel Mabanga had greeted her in the typical Big-Man way, sitting behind his huge office desk in a voluminous chair in the air-conditioned room, looking pompous and self-important. There was nothing about the man that she had liked.

Her initial dislike was augmented by the fact that he quite quickly began to court her. In contrast to other military staff she met, he was very persistent and asked her out constantly. The researcher thinks about how her initial unease and fear of the particular (sexualized) risks that a woman surely must expect (and take precautions against) when researching military men had been uncalled for. Colonel Mabanga had been the only exception. Despite the researcher's well-rehearsed lies that she was a missionary child, deeply Christian, married, and totally devoted to her husband, he had persisted in his sexual advances. She recalls how these culminated when, one day in his office, he suddenly took her in his arms and started to kiss her. Wary about the consequences for her research project, she had resisted the immediate temptation to slap him hard in the face and rush away from the office. Instead, she slowly and gently pushed him away. She had assured him that she found him very attractive, and that she regretted that she had to decline, reminding him again that she was a devout Christian and wife.

Some years later, the researcher had told Captain Makasi and another woman officer about that event. Thinking back on that exchange now makes her blush. When she had told them what she had done (nothing), they had become quite upset. Captain Makasi had loudly proclaimed that she would never have tolerated that kind of behavior: she would have reported him to his superiors. While Captain Makasi and her colleague never said it out loud, the implicit message was clear: the researcher had behaved in a cowardly way, failing to stand up for women's rights and against sexual harassment.

Recalling the Evolving Relationship: A Truly Helpful Broker

Sitting in the car on her way back from the MoD to her hotel, the researcher recalls how quickly the relationship had changed. That initial uncomfortable incident turned out to be the end of Colonel Mabanga's attempts to court her, as well as her dislike of him, and the start of a new kind of relationship. Instead of inviting the researcher out for drinks alone, Colonel Mabanga invited her to his house to meet his wife, Henriette, and their children. She saw them quite often after that, in her house, or in theirs, which were not far apart. She had enjoyed spending time with them, especially with cheerful Henriette who was always full of jokes.

During all that time, Colonel Mabanga also continued to assist the researcher, facilitating contacts with commanders in various parts of the country. Simply put, he introduced and vouched for her. While she quickly became less dependent on him, developing good connections with other military commanders who could offer more interesting research opportunities, Colonel Mabanga had remained important to her. His position at the MoD had provided her with a sense of security. Like other officers who assisted her, he always showed a deep concern for her safety. When she was going to new places he contacted the commanders in place to check the security situation, asking them to make sure the researcher had a safe journey, sometimes by asking them to offer her transport in military vehicles.

Watching the scene of two traffic police officers desperately struggling to dissolve a traffic jam reminds the researcher of the many other times that Colonel Mabanga had assisted her in other ways, for instance when she had gotten into trouble with the police for a range of minor alleged – and real – offences. On such occasions, she told the police officers that she was 'one of them', and connected to the MoD. Playing the 'I am highly connected' card, which she sometimes illustrated by showing the police officers the contacts in her phone, often did the trick. But in the few instances it had not, she had called up Colonel Mabanga and asked him to intervene on her behalf. While she sometimes sensed that he was not totally comfortable helping her in such circumstances, he always came to her assistance. She remembers one particular occasion when a traffic police officer had been unusually persistent, daring even to argue with Colonel Mabanga on her phone. The police officer had insisted loudly that Colonel Mabanga was undermining the law, and that he was just doing his duties as a police. That time she had felt particularly ashamed – ashamed about her failure to get the papers of the car in order, but mostly about the ways in which she handled the failure. She had, once again, asked Colonel Mabanga to misuse his position to fix her problems.

Yet, thinking back on it now, she reassures herself with thoughts of how she, in line with the rules of reciprocity in the Congo, had also assisted Colonel Mabanga in various ways. This never involved the exchange of money. Colonel

Mabanga had never asked her to contribute to hospital bills for sick children, to school fees, or for funerals, as many of the lower ranking military staff whom she met during her research did. While not as wealthy as many other officers who were better connected to the presidential circle, Colonel Mabanga was quite well off. Her efforts to return the favors and assistance he offered had instead come in other forms. In addition to the occasional bottles of Amarulla and books, she had given him advice on an array of matters, such as recommendations for good universities in other parts of Africa for his children, and how to get a visa to Europe.

Most of these efforts to return favors had felt unproblematic. She remembers only one time when Colonel Mabanga had come with a question or request that had posed a clear ethical dilemma for her. He told her that Henriette had built a house and needed the researcher's help by finding a white tenant. As he explained, they wanted to have a tenant whom she could trust to pay the rent regularly and thought that the researcher could help them find a suitable candidate through her connections in the so-called expatriate community. The request had immediately caused the researcher discomfort. That the house was not actually Henriette's was quite obvious, as she did not have a job or income of her own. That the house was built, in part, through funding obtained through some sort of 'business activities' linked to his position was clear. While the researcher could not know the exact source, she felt disgusted by the idea that it might come from Colonel Mabanga's management of the salary lists. Accepting his request was clearly wrong, not only in relation to common research ethics rules, which prohibit any support of 'corruption', but most palpably, it would feel like an act of profound betrayal of all the soldiers she had met who struggled to survive on their meager and delayed salaries – salaries that often went missing altogether, embezzled by people higher up in the chain of command, like Colonel Mabanga. The researcher comforted herself with the idea that she was sure that she did not know anyone anyway in the mainly NGO Human Rights expatriate circles who were in need of a house, and who would rent from an Army officer's wife. In short, she had been presented with an impossible request and she would simply never find a willing tenant, even if she tried. She had felt relieved. (It later turned out she was wrong. Some human rights advocates were indeed willing to rent from an Army officer, even though she informed them about the probable sources that had enabled the construction of the house. Yet, that is another story.)

Uncomfortable Questions

Five years later, the researcher is sitting in her untidy office preparing a lecture on research ethics and responsibility for the PhD students of her department. This makes her reflect back, once again, on her relationship with Colonel

Mabanga. After a year in prison, he had been released due to poor health and, three years later, he passed away of a heart attack. While the researcher visited him and Henriette a few times in the months following his release, they soon lost contact. Thinking back on it now, she wonders why that happened. She remembers that he called her more infrequently, and that their few encounters had been quite strained. His sense of degradation and shame was so obvious, and contrasted painfully with his labored efforts to be cheerful and confident, as well as his continuous assertions that he would get his position back soon. They both knew that this was a quite unlikely scenario. This tense atmosphere, the researcher reasons, surely contributed to the slow death of her relationship with him and Henriette. Yet, guarding/keeping relationships ('garder de bonnes relations') by calling or visiting from time to time is perceived as crucial in the Congo. She had done that in relation to many of the other commanders who had assisted in the research. She had even maintained relationships with those on various US and EU sanction lists, whose official human rights records were more tainted than that of Colonel Mabanga. Yet, the researcher had not maintained her relationship with Colonel Mabanga. She admits to herself that the main reason that she failed to do so was probably that he, after losing his position, was no longer useful to her. Remembering the many joyful encounters with his family, that thought makes the researcher feel a bit guilty.

But above all, her desperate efforts to find something meaningful to say on the topic of in/security and ethics in her upcoming lecture reactivate the nagging thought that she, after all, might have contributed to Colonel Mabanga losing his position. She thinks about the consequences that the turn of events had, in particular for the future of his children. She remembers how many times he had said that it was not good if she came to his office too often as others could start to ask questions. Had she respected that? She is not sure anymore. She also recalls other soldiers whom she and her colleague might have put in dangerous situations throughout their research. In many of the informal discussions and interviews with lower-ranking staff, the soldiers had expressed their dissatisfaction with their commanders, accusing them both of corruption and incompetence. Such discussions had often taken place in small groups, in bars or out in the open. What if some of their military colleagues who were present had reported the more talkative ones to the commanders, thereby getting them into trouble? She shivers when she thinks about the appalling conditions in military detentions, and the instances of corporal punishments at military camps that she had witnessed over the years. Might she be responsible for bringing such punishments upon some of the soldiers that they had talked to?

When reading the course literature that she is supposed to relate to for her upcoming lecture, she also realizes that she never received the standard questions raised in the texts often directed to other researchers in conflict

settings; namely what she, as a researcher, had been doing to ensure the safety of 'her' research subjects. The reasons for that appear rather clear: the military research brokers and research subjects that she had worked with were probably seen as unworthy of such considerations. The researcher recalls the many discussions she has had with diplomats and human rights activists about the lack of justice in military trials in the DRC. She had referred to research showing that many soldiers were sentenced and imprisoned for sexual violence without proper evidence, or even access to defense lawyers. The response she received, often delivered together with a shrug or laugh to seemingly emphasize the triviality of the problem raised were regularly 'well, none of them are innocent anyway'. Such responses, portraying all soldiers as perpetrators and as devoid of the (human) right to a fair trial, had made her truly upset and worried.

Yet, as she now reflects on what she had done in order to ensure the safety of the military staff she had encountered throughout the research, she cannot stop the distressing thought that she might herself be guilty of relegating questions about military men's rights and safety to the margins. Had she acted in a responsible manner in relation to the military brokers and research subjects that she had worked with? Or had she conveniently, subconsciously, embraced the dominant assumption that she herself was the main person at risk? Had she put her own security concerns center stage, brushing away legitimate concerns about the soldiers' rights and safety, all in the pursuit of producing new research results? Recognizing that this question, in part, must be answered in the affirmative fills her with unease and guilt. She desperately tries to find some comfort in the thought that few would accuse or blame her.

Afterword

In the narrative above, I have reflected upon my experience of using active military officers-cum-research brokers in research on the Congolese armed forces conducted, together with my colleague Maria Stern, between 2005 and 2015. Hanging out with officers and soldiers early on appeared as the only viable way of collecting in-depth data on how the armed forces operate and interact with civilians, including the violence they commit. As reflected in the story above, many of the officers became not only key informants, but also assumed broker roles, facilitating access to other officers and soldiers, some even becoming friends of sorts.

I chose to reflect upon my experience here by drawing upon the traditions of autoethnography (Dauphinee 2010, Doty 2010) and Narrative IR (Edkins 2013, Naumes 2015), which more recently have established themselves as research methodologies in political science and IR. These traditions emphasize the ways in which academic language, in addition to excluding

certain audiences, limits our imaginations and ways of thinking and knowing. They highlight the ethical value and political potential of *purposeful* (Dauphinee 2010) autoethnographic and narrative writing, in that it can bring contradictions to light that are difficult to convey through more traditional academic prose, providing more room to incorporate those normally excluded political science discourses (Naumes 2015). These traditions are arguably particularly useful in ethical and methodological reflections, enabling more profound reflections that better capture various ethical and methodological dilemmas and their accompanying emotions in research endeavors.

In most similar writings, the narratives stand-alone; a purposeful (Dauphinee 2010) autoethnographic account should not require a separate explanation or clarification. Yet, in order to situate the narrative above in the context of the themes raised in this special issue, I nevertheless wish to highlight some of the main points it tries to convey. Clearly, the story reflects a plethora of ethical dilemmas. In addition to posing troubling questions about our own complicity (as researchers) and the choices we (may) make in order to further our research (careers), it highlights the ambivalent feelings experienced when befriending officers serving in armed forces with a reputation for serious human rights abuses and corruption. As reflected in the story, working with and getting to know research brokers often defined as belonging to 'repugnant groups' (sic) (Gallaher 2009) poses particular challenges, ultimately casting doubt, not only on simple distinctions between good/bad, victim/perpetrator, but also on the morality of the researcher herself.

Yet, above all, the narrative sought to reflect upon one of the main queries in this Special Issue, namely insecurity and risk. Posing that question in relation to research brokers who bear uniforms and arms poses particular challenges since such groups often are portrayed as somehow fundamentally 'other'. In contrast to civilians, they seldom appear as subjects in need of, or even deserving, researcher security assessments and measures. Moreover, dominant assumptions that the researcher – especially if a woman – is the one at risk in such researcher-broker relations further complicate such queries. Yet, drawing from my experiences and readings from the DRC context, brokers who wear a uniform and bear arms often share the general (civilian) research broker's predicaments of insecurity. In a volatile military context, marked by constant power struggles and arbitrary punishments, they might even be subject to more risks. The story also suggests a narrative of risk and insecurity that differs from the familiar gendered and radicalized story in which the (often western/white) female researcher is construed as the person 'at risk' – particularly so when engaging with men that are cast as notably violent, brutal and 'militarized' (see introduction article). Clearly, the initial uncomfortable event with Colonel

Mabanga does indeed reflect how women researchers can/tend to be exposed to particular (sexualized) risks. Yet, in my experience (and despite experiencing this event) the people exposed to real insecurity throughout the research project were never myself or my colleague, but the officers and soldiers that we encountered on the way (see also Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2015). In short, the narrative calls for further critical reflections about how familiar distinctions between good/bad, civilian/military, women/men, perpetrators/victims are ingrained in the ways in which we (as researchers) reflect (and ultimately act) upon questions of in/security, ethics and researcher responsibility in conflict research.

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