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**Brokering research with war-affected people:
The tense relationship between opportunities and ethics**

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If students are going to earn degrees, they've got to come up with dissertation topics. And since dissertations can be written about everything under the sun the number of topics is infinite. Sheets of paper covered with words pile up in archives sadder than cemeteries because no one ever visits them, not even on All Souls' Day. Culture is perishing in overproduction, in an avalanche of words, in the madness of quantity. That's why one banned book in your former country means infinitely more than the billions of words spewed out by our universities.

MILAN KUNDERA | The unbearable lightness of being

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Abstract

This article examines the roles of brokers or intermediaries in conducting research in a (post-) conflict context and uses this analysis as a lens to rethink reflexive ethics in research. Drawing on fieldwork in Gulu, northern Uganda, the paper analyses the complex social space in which brokers navigate and how their position and strategies are influenced by opportunities and expectations of different players in the field of research. Their ambiguous position, facing two directions at once, challenges the idea of brokers as neutral intermediaries. The paper outlines how brokers, in the pursuit of opportunities and in trying to meet expectations, at times conceal information for researchers and rather become active promoters of the research project than mere facilitators. It is further argued that research in northern Uganda may reproduce conceptions of war-affected people as vulnerable and of the war-affected context as problem-fraught and in need of intervention. The paper concludes by seeking ways to rethink a reflexive ethical stance in ethnographic research and encourages reflexive researchers to take the role of brokers and other stakeholders into account.

Keywords

brokers, research ethics, reflexivity, methodology, ethnography, northern Uganda, conflict research, intermediaries, war-affected

Abstract (NL)

Deze paper onderzoekt de rol van *brokers* of tussenpersonen in onderzoek in een (post)conflict context en gebruikt deze analyse als een bril om na te denken over ethische reflexiviteit in onderzoek. Vertrekkende van veldonderzoek in Gulu, Oeganda, analyseert de paper de complexe sociale ruimte waarin *brokers* navigeren, en hoe hun positie en strategieën beïnvloed worden door opportuniteiten en verwachtingen van de verschillende spelers in het onderzoeksveld. Hun ambigue positie, tussen onderzoekers en participanten, zet het idee van een neutrale bemiddelaar op de helling. De paper schetst hoe *brokers* soms informatie voor onderzoekers verbergen, en onderzoek eerder actief promoten dan louter faciliteren. Verder wordt gesteld dat onderzoek in Noord-Oeganda kan bijdragen aan het reproduceren van opvattingen over door oorlog getroffen mensen als kwetsbaar, en een door oorlog getroffen context als een context beladen met problemen. De paper concludeert met het zoeken naar manieren om de huidige opvattingen van reflexieve ethiek in etnografisch onderzoek te heroverwegen, en moedigt onderzoekers aan om de rol van *brokers* en andere betrokkenen aan te kaarten in hun onderzoek.

Brokering research with war-affected people: The tense relationship between opportunities and ethics

Introduction

The humanitarian (post-)conflict setting is an intricate web of diverse actors, relationships, barriers and entrance gates, where researchers entering the field as 'outsiders' have to navigate their way in and through (Porter et al., 2005). In addition, researchers move into a context that is marked by insecurity, burdening them with a continuous dilemma between carrying out research activities and avoiding unnecessary risks (Hoffmann, 2014). The complexity and security constraints in these contexts renders researchers in need of assistance when entering the field. They therefore rely on research assistants or 'brokers', local middlemen who negotiate or 'broker' the relationship between researchers and participants. Despite their significant presence in the research field, the role of brokers has largely been neglected in reflections on fieldwork, the report of studies and theorization of ethnography (Gupta, 2014; Middleton and Cons, 2014). Previous theoretical reflections on the role of brokers in humanitarian and development contexts demonstrate that brokers are "powerful yet marginal and vulnerable figure[s] located between fault lines and connection points within complex systems and relationships" (Lewis and Mosse, 2006: 12). Bierschenk and colleagues (2002) examine the political dynamics of brokerage in development projects in Africa, and suggest that their position is not confined to the role of passive 'transmission belts'. Rather, they operate at the 'interfaces' of different world-views and knowledge systems, and are actively involved in gaining access, negotiating roles, relationships and representations, and thereby also creating new realities (Bierschenk et al., 2002; Lewis and Mosse, 2006). Hoffmann (2014) illustrates how during his research in eastern Congo, brokers' experience-based knowledge about the "local rules of the game" was quintessential to gain access and establish relations with informants (p.5). Especially in sometimes dangerous (post-)conflict contexts, the local expertise of brokers is invaluable to make informed decisions about what can and cannot be done, while at the same time making it possible to acquire otherwise inaccessible information. Their active involvement also suggests that brokers may have their own interests and stakes in shaping the project. Büscher and Vlassenroot (2010) point out that a humanitarian context creates opportunities and instigates social mobility for certain groups of people, often the educated middle-class. The fact that brokers' positions are marked by what is at stake for them, challenges the idea of a value-free intermediary, and raises ethical concerns.

This study draws on Bierschenk's notion of 'brokers' to examine the roles of intermediaries in research with war-affected populations in post-conflict northern Uganda. The article starts from the perspective of brokers, operating in the social space between researchers and research participants, to understand how they actively shape research relationships and the research field itself (Bierschenk et al., 2002; Gupta, 2014; Lewis and Mosse, 2006; Middleton and Cons, 2014).

More specifically, this study builds on the assumption of Middleton and Cons (2014) that the involvement of brokers may create compromising situations and ethical 'grey zones' in research, and that the neglect of the role of brokers constitutes a lacuna in reflexive ethics. They suggest that "writing research assistants back into our collective reckonings throws a different kind of light on ethnography's ethical quandaries – old and new" (p. 286).

Drawing on six weeks of fieldwork and interviews with brokers of research in post-conflict northern Uganda, this article examines the opportunities pursued by brokers, and how 'what is at stake' for them challenges research ethics in a war-affected context. Research was defined during conversations with the brokers, who mostly made a distinction between research conducted or ordered by humanitarian organizations, and independently conducted academic research.

The main aim of this article is to better understand what brokers pursue, and in doing so, instigate critical reflection in researchers upon the roles and stakes of brokers in ethnography. The aim is not to scandalize or discredit brokers; on the contrary, it will be argued that demystifying the role of brokers will create room for more extensive ethical reflection, discussion and dialogue. By unveiling how brokers fundamentally reshape and reconfigure fieldwork, fieldwork relationships and our notion of 'the field' itself (Gupta, 2014), the study seeks to write the role of brokers into ethnography's reflexive ethics. While brokers can be involved in all types of research in various fields of study, this article mostly focuses on reflexivity in ethnographic research, where the connection between researcher and the researched is typically more intimate and long-term, and self-consciousness of those involved may lead to greater complexities (Davies, 1999). Moreover, as Gupta (2014) argues, ethnographic research "is created through encounter and experience, it is vulnerable to contingency and circumstance, and it can be influenced more easily by the negative pressures of governments and locally-powerful people" (p.398). And while considerations of reflexivity and the role of brokers are important for all types of research, especially in ethnography they play an important role in configuring and shaping the ethical and moral aspects of the project.

In what follows, the paper briefly outlines the history of the war in northern Uganda, and how this has led to a proliferation of aid and agencies in the city of Gulu, now one of the region's main humanitarian hubs. As a result, the city attracted a range of research institutes and researchers interested in studying the conflict and its aftermath. The paper then expands on ethics and reflexivity, and the role of brokers, mostly drawing on previous theorization of the role of brokers in development projects (Bierschenk et al., 2002; Geertz, 1960; Lewis and Mosse, 2006), and some recent reflections on their role in ethnographic research (Gupta, 2014; Hoffmann, 2014; Middleton and Cons, 2014). The following sections report and discuss the results of the fieldwork and deal with the complex systems and relationships within which brokers navigate, their brokering strategies in the field, and how these are in tension with ethics in research. The analysis will then be taken one step further, by examining how brokers and research in a humanitarian context in general also shape the research field itself, and reproduce popular notions about war-affected people and environments. The paper concludes by using the role of brokers as a lens to contribute to trending notions of reflexive ethics in ethnographic research.

War and the proliferation of aid, agencies and research in Gulu

The humanitarian character of Gulu is rooted in a history of conflict in northern Uganda between 1986 and 2007, when Gulu was the centre at war between the Ugandan government and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), a rebel group headed by the infamous Joseph Kony. The brutal character of the conflict, involving thousands of children as soldiers and actively abusing the civilian population, led the conflict to become described as one of the most deadly and complex humanitarian emergencies (Allen and Vlassenroot, 2010). During the 1990s, Gulu's population grew tremendously due to forced internally displacement of rural populations seeking protection in the city and in rural internally displaced camps (Doom and Vlassenroot, 1999; United Nations Department of Humanitarian and Affairs, 1996). This context triggered the international community to provide humanitarian aid. Gulu, being the largest city in the heavily affected Acholiland, logically became a base from which many humanitarian organizations coordinated their emergency response (Branch, 2013). Although aid was exclusively targeted at the rural camps and people in Gulu town did not receive adequate support, the town offered better chances in terms of security or economic opportunities, mainly in the light of the rise of the humanitarian industry and its surrounding economy (e.g. housing, transport, security). As a result, life in town became seen as superior to life in camps where people were heavily dependent on humanitarian aid. Mostly young men and women were attracted by this modern and global life offering freedom and opportunities that were impossible in the village or in the rural camps (Branch, 2013). Along with the end of the conflict that resulted in a transition of the region to a post-conflict context, attention shifted from humanitarian to development interests. While most international relief organizations left Gulu after 2007, the consequences of war and the welfare of war-affected populations remain a key interest of many international and national non-governmental (NGOs) and community based organizations (CBOs) today¹.

An influx of humanitarian aid in a conflict context, especially when becoming more protracted and transforming into a post-conflict area, is usually accompanied by researchers interested in how the conflict can exist and persist, how people and the environment are affected by it, and how people and the region can be better supported to recover from the conflict. This resulted into an influx of various conflict researchers, including political and social scientists, economists, psychologist, anthropologists, etc. concerned with issues of reintegration, conflict resolution, transitional justice etc. In northern Uganda, research has been conducted by foreign researchers (ranging from individual students to highly concerted research teams), international agencies, organizations, (inter)national NGOs and community-based organizations looking for funding, local students pursuing their degrees etc. Within a humanitarian economy, increasing competitiveness over donor funding and recent demands for evidence of organizations' impact and efficiency, research becomes a valuable resource.

In northern Uganda, most research is conducted within the 'communities', the rural village areas which were the main interest areas of humanitarian and relief organizations during the war and suffered from greater insecurity and poverty (Branch, 2013). Such contexts are often difficult

to access for researchers, and make brokers, fixers and helpers to become essential actors in research. As Guerin and Kumar (2008) argue, “the emergence of various development policies and then their decentralization (with, as a result, a blossoming of all kinds of “grass roots” associations), represents an extraordinary opportunity for these brokers” (p.10). Within a humanitarian context essentially characterized by the interactions between organizations and local communities, two actors with differing backgrounds and (cultural) values, there is an increasing demand for local brokers, rendering brokerage to become a valuable expertise and livelihood strategy (Bierschenk et al., 2002; Büscher and Vlassenroot, 2010).

Brokers, ethics and reflexivity

Brokers and ethnographic research

The role of brokers has received little attention in reports of fieldwork, and when addressed at all, then mostly in footnotes, acknowledgements or superficial discussions. Gupta (2014) argues that the absence of brokers in literature may be due to the discomfort of researchers to expose their incompetence and inability to negotiate the field site when they admit to being in need of assistance. In addition, historical controversies regarding the exploitation of research assistants such as ‘Doc’ in Foote Whyte’s *Street Corner Society (1993 [1943])*, or the complex social transformation of Victor Turner’s assistant Muchona described in *The Forest of the Symbols (1967)*, may have spurred researchers to erase brokers from the final products of ethnographic research (Gupta, 2014; Middleton and Cons, 2014).

Ethnographic studies on development projects were the first to have renewed attention for brokers. Bierschenk and colleagues (2002), for example, recognize the rise of a new social category, and how particular actors become specialized in brokering relationships between two compartmentalized worlds. Interestingly, they depart from the heavily normative presentation of such people common in development discourses, and the question whether brokers are “catalyst or parasites” (Neubert, 1996: 3). Rather, brokerage is located “within the fragmented politics of the postcolonial state, where power is exercised both through formal bureaucratic logics and through a diverse range of ‘supra-local’ associations and networks, in which there is a flourishing of intermediate actors and organisations.” (Lewis and Mosse, 2006: 12). Abercrombie and Hill (1976) likewise identify brokerage as a specific form of patronage, a more business-like instrumental relationship of trade between an individual (client) and a more influential person (patron). Indeed, brokerage extends far beyond the praxis of research or a humanitarian context and can be found in all societies and in various areas such as trade, religion or politics (Bierschenk et al., 2002). Lewis and Mosse (2006) illustrate that issues of identity, loyalty, support and protection are central to brokerage, and that brokerage is always entrenched with personal relations and sentiments. The development of humanitarian projects, then, entails a continuous negotiation between a numbers of players who have their own intentions, and opportunities to gain from this negotiation (Bierschenk et al., 2002; Lewis and Mosse, 2006). Whether it is to build or maintain an image, an identity, a status, or to gain or to sustain power, relationships or access to resources, brokers constantly “read the meaning of the project into the different institutional

languages of its stakeholder's supporters, constantly creating interest and making real" (Mosse, 2005: 9).

Recently, brokers and other intermediaries have regained the interest in ethnographies of research projects, as for example illustrated in the *Fieldwork(ers) project* published in *Ethnography* (2014). The articles in this special issue bring together the voices of researchers and research assistants to critically reflect upon how knowledge is created during fieldwork. Similar to Bierschenk's and Lewis and Mosse's analyses of development brokers, the authors approach brokers as 'agents' rather than passive, neutral middlemen; and argue that brokers actively shape who is talked to, what topics are discussed, what is said and what is translated, how the researcher is introduced to the research field and informants, etc. The *Fieldworker(ers) project* thereby advocates for "a critical reappraisal of the players of contemporary ethnography" and "forge a new calculus of reflexive thinking" (Middleton and Cons, 2014: 281). Indeed, as argued above, the role of brokers and the opportunities they pursue, pushes the boundaries of ethics in research.

Ethics, reflexivity and conflict research

In light of the 'reflexive turn', and the post-modern and feminist rediscovery of cultural relativism and reflexivity in humanities and social science research at large, researchers regained interest in brokers and other players in ethnographic research. This renewed interest seems especially relevant in research in (post-)conflict contexts, which entails myriad practical and ethical difficulties. Common concerns are, among others, related to issues of violence, safety, power, trust, trauma and the vulnerability of war-affected people (Boyden, 2005; Thomson, 2013; Utas, 2005). Hoffmann (2014) describes the tension between pursuing knowledge and fulfilling academic requirements, and the need to avoid hazardous situations. He argues that such dilemmas compel researchers to look for new tactics that can be radically different from tactics used in 'ideal' or classic field circumstances. Boyden (2005), in his account of researching children in war, refers to 'ethical minefields' and delineates how research relationships are mediated by the politics of the conflict, suspicion and misunderstanding. Such realities have instigated the debate on conducting ethical studies on people in war-affected environments, warning researchers to move beyond the principle of 'do no harm' (Hugman et al., 2011) and conventional protocols of consent, confidentiality and anonymity (Bouka, 2013).

Traditionally, reflexivity has been mostly linked to issues of validity in research, questioning the possibility to 'objectively know' social worlds and urging researchers to acknowledge their own positionality and biases, and their influence upon the research situation (Davies, 1999; Lenzo, 1995). Recently, however, the concept of reflexivity moves beyond the idea of the researcher inherently affecting their final work, and is also involved with ethics and the political act of conducting research (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). From an ethical perspective, reflexivity entails a shift away from a mere procedural, predefined 'checklist ethics' and underscores the need to rethink not only the research methods and the final product of research, but also the researcher, participants and the context (Anspach and Mizrachi, 2006; Davies, 1999; Foley, 2002). The central idea here is that procedural ethics cannot in itself provide all that is needed for dealing with

“ethically important moments” in qualitative research, because they are too situated and nuanced (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). Within the reflexive turn, ethics is seen as a process and a way of thinking in which researchers seek for a ‘good answer’ to a question there is no right answer to. Ethics becomes seen as a constant process of reflection, and is not a task that is fully dealt with before the start of the research project, but that is – or should be – inherently part of it (Anspach and Mizrachi, 2006; Cerwonka and Malkki, 2008; Davies, 1999; Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). In such thinking about ethics, one cannot ignore the role of all players involved in research, including that of brokers. Yet, as it will be argued below, ethical reflexivity often remains an individual task of the researcher, reflecting about the relationships between him/herself and his/her research subject (Etherington, 2007), thereby neglecting other players.

There is no doubt that the reflexive turn has urged authors to critically reflect on their own influence on their research projects, judging by numerous reflection papers. Still, brokers are only discussed from the perspectives of authors who critically dwell on the role of different actors and relationships in the final product of their work. Rarely has research engaged with listening to brokers themselves about their personal beliefs, viewpoints and experiences with research. Yet, their involvement is imperative for reflexive research ethics. One of the core ideas of the Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association is “to consult actively with the affected individuals or group(s), with the goal of establishing a working relationship that can be beneficial to all parties involved” (American Anthropology Association, 2012: 2). Some other central ethical tenets in ethnographic research relate to openness and transparency, remuneration, reciprocity, informed consent, harm and negative impact, and confidentiality (Madison, 2011). The role of brokering, negotiating research and establishing trust between different parties seems central to all of above ethical principles ethnographers should pursue. To achieve a truly reflexive ethical stance in ethnographic research, the role of brokers matters, and needs more consideration.

Again one exception to the above claim are the essays in the *Fieldwork(ers) project*. Hoffman and Tarawalley (2014) and Middleton and Pradhan (2014), for example, engage in a dialogue between researcher and assistant, and gain understanding on how their roles and positions led to mutual transformations and shaped the research field and research relationships. Through joint critical reflection, these insightful contributions manage to illustrate how broker-research relationships shape ethnographic research itself, in a way that this paper is not able to do. The current study, however, engages with brokers in all their guises that are not the author’s research assistants, but have facilitated some anonymous researchers’ projects. This has the advantage that informants may reveal stories that they would not share otherwise. By drawing on a diverse range of stories, in finding contradictions and agreements, the article hopes to inspire future research practices. In establishing a dialogue with them about their views, opportunities, and strategies, this study uses brokers’ stories as a lens to rethink current notions of reflexivity in research.

Methodology

This study was conducted in July-August 2014 during six weeks of fieldwork in Gulu, northern Uganda. The main source of information were interviews with people working with 'vulnerable groups'² in organizations (NGOs, CBOs) in the 'humanitarian space' of Gulu (including social workers, counsellors, field workers, etc.). These easily identifiable and approachable informants were chosen given the limited time available for fieldwork. Moreover, humanitarian organizations often serve as entrance gates for researchers, and people attached to the organizations act as 'gatekeepers' between researchers and participants, facilitate researchers and often accompany them as assistants in the field. Research on ethics and opportunities with research participants themselves, or other stakeholders (e.g. political or cultural leaders) in this context would certainly be of capital value, and deserves further investigation.

The first informants were contacted after a visit to the local NGO forum, where a list of all organizations in Gulu District was received. Informants in their turn made referrals to other organizations that they knew regularly facilitated researchers. Another strategy for finding informants was through random encounters with researchers in action³, who could bring me into contact with their brokers and fixers. All informants had extensive experience with research and researchers in this context as brokers, but also as participants, translators, or researchers themselves. The interviews covered topics such as previous experiences with research, opportunities for brokers or their organizations and views towards ethics. In total, 20 practitioners were formally interviewed. Informed consent was obtained from all informants, addressing confidentiality, anonymity, feedback on findings, contact details etc. All interviews except for one⁴, were audiotaped and transcribed. These interviews were complemented with informal conversations with participants of research, local and foreign researchers, research assistants, and random people encountered on the street, the copy shop, or other public places. From these informal conversations, detailed notes were taken immediately afterwards in order to ensure accuracy and clarity upon later consult.

Data was analysed using NVivo (QSR International Pty Ltd. Version 10, 2012), a software programme for analysing qualitative data in a structured manner. Although not commonly used in ethnographic research, NVivo helped me to organize the interviews in order to easily move back and forth between the data, literature, and emerging ideas. However, in the end, this paper is a product of events and incidents, circumstance, leaps of logical, conversations and interpretations. The result of this improvisatory and reflexive process is outlined in the next sections of this paper.

Practice what you preach – on problematizing brokers

While reading and writing this paper about reflexivity, I caught myself hardly realizing how the exact idea for this paper came about. This urged me to reflect on how I came to ‘problematize’ the role of brokers. I think it all started when two years ago I lived for eight months in Lira, northern Uganda. I was an intern in a psychosocial support centre for children and youth and conducted my thesis research on the social reintegration of formerly recruited youth. I was one of the many researchers coming to northern Uganda, collecting their data and taking off again. I saw people with great expectations towards research, but also those ones who were tired of it. People who felt that their work or lives had been improved through (participating in) research, and those who were reluctant or sceptical towards it. These experiences in northern Uganda as a foreign researcher have puzzled me ever since and left me with many unresolved questions and ongoing reflections. Most of these questions are related one way or another to the topic of ‘ethics in research’. What do we do with the fact that war-affected people, and children in particular, are considered so extremely vulnerable? Why are we interested in them? Should research be conducted in such contexts? Should we be the ones to do it? And then, how do we come to the right questions? What can and should we do with the answers? How do we make people feel valued when they participate in research? Such questions are probably rooted in my training as an educational scientist, where we had to self-reflect until we became lightheaded – and then still had to “dig deeper”. The next year again I had to decide on a thesis topic. A PhD project in prospect, new critical insights during the master in conflict and development, numerous wanderings in post-colonial and critical development literature and even more possible research topics later, I decided to submit some of my ethical concerns about research in post-conflict northern Uganda to scrutiny. While I would have loved to engage with participants of research into such discussions, the limited time available for fieldwork and my own reservation to engage with people in a process when not being convinced it would be meaningful for them, led me to end up having (incredibly interesting) conversations with brokers of research. Their intermediary position between researchers and participants proved to be an excellent lens through which to reflect upon some of these questions, and gave me even more ethical food for thought.

The social space of brokering: a complex system of opportunities and expectations

This section explores the complex systems and relationships (Middleton and Cons, 2014), or the ‘social space’ in which brokers operate. As we will see, this space is typified by the fact that most brokers interviewed in this study had affiliations with humanitarian organizations. This also marked their position and strategies as brokers, and should be kept in mind while reading the remainder of this paper. It will become clear that brokers are not only influenced by opportunities they pursue themselves, but also by opportunities and expectations of their organizations or the communities they work with.

Not surprisingly, a first opportunity for brokers in this study was employment as a result of the presence of humanitarian agencies. One informant pointed out that: “organizations became because of research, and they have created employment. I have been employed”. Another person confirmed that brokering research “helps you in making quick money”. Even when already paid by organizations, some brokers also received extra money from researchers they assisted. Yet, employment opportunities were more frequently framed in terms of social benefit, creating upward social mobility for brokers. One day, a lady in a copy centre asked me if should could be my research assistant. She did not need a lot of money for it, she valued the experience and that maybe one day I could also help her. In the context of northern Uganda, jobs in humanitarian organizations, and especially in international organizations, are generally highly appreciated. People working in humanitarian organizations are often well-paid and have an extensive network due to contact and collaboration with other organizations, donors, local governments and the communities they target. The fact that contact with researchers, even when a young student like me, seemed to create expectations for brokers, moreover became evident when several informants asked me about funding opportunities for conducting their own (research) project, or pursue their master or PhD abroad. Opportunities for brokers thus also seemed dependent on the actors they engaged with. Involvement in research organized by international organizations may provide very different opportunities than research conducted by autonomous students.

Particularly for brokers in this study, the social space in which they operate was also defined by the organizations they are affiliated with. Besides pursuing personal opportunities, brokers also acted within the context of an organization. Some brokers in the study told that researchers were placed under their supervision by the management, and that they themselves had little other choice than facilitating the researchers. Yet, research was generally highly appreciated by both organizations and brokers, especially since the results of research helped to write proposals and acquire funding for new interventions. While at times complicating the work of organizations because of confusion between aid and research in the receiving communities, opportunities for funding clearly prevailed over the drawbacks of research. This can be understood by the fact that organizations are dependent on external donors, and the wider political developments of the Ugandan government as ‘donor darling’ (Whitfield and Fraser, 2010). The vast presence of humanitarian organizations in northern Uganda have hollowed out the state and transferred its duties (e.g. education, health care) to non-governmental actors needful of their own funding. Despite the end of the conflict and recent economic development, the Ugandan government has conveniently used the label of ‘fragile state’ to continue to be dependent on donor funding (Fisher, 2014). And because procedures to acquire funding are becoming increasingly competitive, with donors relying heavily on ‘facts’ and ‘evidence-based knowledge’, research understandably becomes a key resource in the survival of the humanitarian industry.

In such reality, research becomes especially valued when it provides insight in the causes and effects of certain realities (e.g. war) and develops clear cut recommendations on how to deal with problems in its aftermath. The following account illustrates this utilitarian perspective towards research that most brokers endorsed:

I have been looking at research as an initiative to guide people in carrying out development activities. Because without research you will be not be able to know exactly the truth about something. But with research issues can be identified, and recommendations that are given, if really followed, can make change to these issues ... Research can help to make you address the actual issue that is there. The result will be more positive.

Generally, brokers rarely made a judgement over the importance of, for example, academic research and more practical monitoring and evaluation studies; in their view, all research was equally valuable and instructive, as long as the results were shared with the participants and humanitarian organizations. Yet, the absence of feedback by many academic researchers led to frustrations towards academic research, but rarely to such an extent that they would no longer support researchers. As will be illustrated in the next part, such perspectives also became apparent in the strategies brokers use when they negotiate research. First, it should be noted that not only personal opportunities or the agendas of organization influenced broker's strategies, but also the war-affected communities and participants of research themselves.

As such, brokers assumed that people in the community do not understand what research is about. One informant explained that, because "people are marginalized, illiterate and poor", they think everyone who comes to listen to their problems is going to bring "new life". Several brokers said that they themselves, in contrast, could understand the importance and benefit of research. It was in emphasising the unawareness of people in the community that brokers stressed their own pivotal role in negotiating research. Following account neatly illustrates how brokers juxtapose their own positions towards research against those of the community:

They [people in the community] are tired now [of research]. Here in northern Uganda, they are tired. Because many people have been moving to them, asking them almost the same questions. They are fed up. But generally research report can help a lot ... But in the community there is a lot of problems, as I told you. They need to be really engaged to know what research is all about. They perceive it somehow in a negative way: "Because after coming to me, after talking to me, because I'm illiterate, at the end of the day you do not do anything as a solution to my problem". That is how they perceive. But we appreciate it and we like it to be done, because the report can be used by us. It is very useful. I personally also appreciate also those who do research.

The above account also narrates how people are tired of research, something often referred to by the brokers as "research fatigue". While research has become more common over the years in northern Uganda, and procedures to obtain research approval in Uganda more flexible, people in the communities seem to have become overburdened with research. Especially in Gulu, where aid organizations proliferated, people received many researchers and journalist interested in their stories. Such stories are worrying, since from an ethical point of view, participation in research ought to be voluntary and avoid harm and negative impact (American Anthropology Association, 2012; American Psychiatric Association's Task Force on Research Ethics, 2006; Orb et al., 2001). However, one could also argue that voluntariness is always fuzzy in the light of high expectations towards researchers. During one of the interviews, a broker explained:

Especially in Gulu, we have had so many people. Now for a lay people in the community, he cannot differentiate between a researcher, a journalist, a news reporter, you know. But we have had all these people coming to the community, and many times community members think that when somebody talks to them, they feel there is going to be a benefit.

Although expectations towards researchers in the communities still seem to be high, several brokers also agreed that, over the years, people in the communities came to see research as something that enriches researchers or organizations, but has little benefits for themselves. Clark (2008) similarly argued that research fatigue is more likely when engagement does not lead to change. In a context where communities are heavily dependent upon support from organizations, it is understandable that when research does not have any practical benefit, apathy and resentment may set in. Brokers then have to deal with both perspectives of people in the community who have been disappointed in their expectations, the intentions of researchers and organizations, and their own opportunities and position in the midst of all this.

The above elaboration on the social space in which brokers navigates indicates that their own background, their relationships with the researcher and the community, their social positions within organizations, etc. all influence their position as brokers who need to take into account opportunities and expectations of all players in the field. This part also aimed to refute the idea of brokers as 'rent-seekers'⁵, and tried to stress their complex position in the larger system of humanitarian aid. Next, the following part will examine how this social space also shapes brokering strategies, and how such strategies raise ethical concerns.

Brokering strategies and ethical concerns

The previous part sketched out how brokers operate within a complex social space of opportunities and expectations for all players involved in research. In what follows, the paper will explore how their positions within this social space shape the strategies of brokers. To briefly summarize the previous paragraph, brokers disclosed that they believe that most people in the communities do not understand what research is about, and may be reluctant towards researchers. Basing on the accounts of brokers in this study, most people in the communities were rather negative or cautious towards research. A common narrative was also that war-affected people were tired of research. Yet, research is also an important resource for organizations, and the educated middle-class working in humanitarian organizations tend to have positive views towards research. In addition, brokers have their own position to maintain. To deal with this tension, brokers adopted several strategies. Given the focus of this study on ethics and research, I will elaborate on two related strategies used by brokers: (1) concealing information for researchers, and (2) convincing people in the community to participate. As we will see, in using these strategies, brokers run up against ethical concerns.

Several brokers in this study confessed that they would deliberately conceal information for researchers, in order to avoid disappointment and to not miss out on opportunities for themselves or their organizations. Most brokers would know that people are tired of research, that they are confused by the many people, including researchers, aid deliverers, journalists, etc. coming to visit

them without exactly understanding what these people came for, that some people see research as something irrelevant to their lives – but they would not tell researchers this information. The views of people in the community about research were rarely taken seriously by brokers, and sometimes even portrayed as poor and despicable attitudes:

They [people in the communities] don't feel it's important, because they lack the knowledge about the value of research in a person's life. They have that attitude that research is not something important to them. When researchers come, they don't even bother. People in the village just go and do their garden work.

The fact that people in the community probably did not receive much benefit from research, and that they time after time participated in studies without even knowing what happened with the results, was rarely discussed, or condoned by stressing the benefits of research for “the larger development of the area” or to “help northern Uganda recover from the conflict”.

Several brokers also confessed that sceptical participants would lie to researchers, exaggerate their problems or make up stories to get rid of them. While some brokers saw it as a part of their task to establish trust and make sure that people were willing to participate, others felt they had no choice but concealing information from the researchers. This was especially the case when researchers were quite dominant in their approach or seemed to be in a hurry to gather enough data. Many brokers were very much aware of the fact that researchers do not want to hear that participants may lie, that they are little interested in research, or that they have no idea what research is about. And because researchers generally tended to provide little room to talk about such realities, concealing such information became a common brokering strategy.

Above findings stress the importance of establishing trust between researcher and broker, and the need to make research ethics debatable. For reflexive ethics, this includes the need to move beyond individual reflections on one's position, and extend reflection to the other and the demands of the context (Etherington, 2007). How researchers approach brokers, insight into what different actors pursue, awareness of the opportunities and benefits the research relationship creates etc. all contribute to the making of a reflexive ethical research position. Helgeland (2005), reflecting on her research with vulnerable adolescents, refers to a *discursive position* and to Habermas' claim that opinions about what is right or wrong develop in the “ebb and flow of dialogue”. “The conversation, the dialogue, produces ratios.” (p.555). The aim of reflexive ethics is then not to avoid ethical dilemmas or try to tackle them all in advance. Rather, it means to be attentive to these dilemma's and to be willing to take them up in an ongoing dialogue.

In the intermediary position between researchers pursuing data and communities that are indifferent or even reluctant towards research, brokers also commonly use a second brokering strategy. Most brokers in this study narrated how they inform people about the benefits research and encourage them to participate. In many cases, brokers' tasks were shifting more and more from facilitating research, establishing contacts and providing the necessary logistical support, to sensitization and motivation. In a sense, brokering became more of promoting or 'selling' research in the communities. From an ethical perspective, such a situation that compels brokers to sell

research, raises serious ethical concerns. Following story of one of the brokers illustrates this point. A broker told me about a woman who had talked to more than 50 researchers. She used to be one of the wives of Kony, the leader of the LRA. Over time, she became fed up and developed very negative attitudes towards research. When I asked this broker how she dealt with this situation, she told me that she would “put her [the woman] down, and have a full session with her to prepare her for the interviews”. At the same time, she told researchers that they had to motivate her, by giving her money, sugar or soap. When a researcher decided not to interview this lady because she did not agree with giving these “rewards”, the broker described this as “attitudes of the researchers that are not good”. I asked her why she facilitated researchers to talk to this particular woman. She said researchers wanted information from her “because she has been in the bush for a long time, and because she was close to Kony”. She went on: “And she has been in the internet, so people fly from America to Uganda in her name. So what can I do? In the end, she is always willing to participate.”

Many aspects of this story run counter to some of the most basic ethical principles in research, such as autonomy, avoiding harm or wrong and confidentiality (American Anthropology Association, 2012; Orb et al., 2001). The fact that this broker sees no problem in persistently convincing this woman to tell her story over and over, again stresses the crucial importance of a dialogue in reflexive ethics. In addition, the impression that this broker gives priority to the objectives and pursuits of researchers, at the cost of the interests and welfare of this woman, suggests that there is hierarchy in expectations and opportunities of different stakeholders. This was, however, not always the case as some brokers took their role to “protect” community members from the burden of research quite seriously. Yet, in most accounts, brokers were so convinced of the importance of research and fearful to damage relationships with the researchers, that they would run up against and at times cross ethical boundaries. A reflexive ethics thus also entails the need to become attentive to participants and brokers’ rights and beliefs, and how they are entangled in patriarchal or hierarchical positions of power. These power relationships concern both the research context and relationships in the wider society (Etherington, 2007). As was described earlier in this article, brokerage should also be understood in the fragmented politics of the Ugandan society and the central role of humanitarian agencies in service delivery (Lewis and Mosse, 2006), allowing research to become an essential resource to acquire funding. This likely also contributed to the positive perceptions brokers hold towards research, and the fact that over the years it became easier to conduct research. The procedure to get permission to conduct research in Uganda is, in reality, a mere formality, and organizations easily grant researchers access to beneficiaries and communities they work with. One of the brokers explains:

Most time, especially here, people have gotten used to research. I think they [organizations and officials who have to grant permission to conduct research] appreciate it. It was so strict, it was even so hectic to the researchers. In the time, it was so stressful. You come to do your research, they send you back to Kampala ... It was really so difficult. But I think now they have seen the importance of research, that is why now it is free to come. You can easily enter and you say I want to this and this, and then they take you to the beneficiaries.

This account also illustrates how research in a way became 'normalized', suggesting that little questions are asked about the intentions of researchers and that research itself is seldom subject of critical scrutiny. While this context mainly facilitates researchers to carry out their projects, the drawback of such high degree of freedom also entails that little guidance is provided and ethical boundaries become blurred.

The paper hitherto sketched out the social space in which brokers manoeuvre, and argued that a complex system of opportunities and expectations of different players in the field of research influence brokering strategies. It has also outlined how perspectives of brokers towards research are shaped by this social space. Most brokers hold positive ideas towards research, in contrast to community members, who, according to the brokers, became more and more sceptical towards research. Further, it was reasoned that, within this reality, brokers use strategies such as concealing information from researchers and brokering begins to resemble selling of research, rather than its facilitation. This runs counter to some of the most basic ethical principles in social sciences, and discloses the complex power relationships in which brokers are entangled. While such findings may be uncomfortable, the aim is not to depreciate brokers or discourage researchers to undertake projects in complex contexts. Rather, such stories plea for an ethics that move beyond procedures and predefined principles, and argue for an ongoing, processual, reflexive ethics that allows to deal with ethical concerns occurring within specific contexts. As argued before, this also requires a discursive stance in which ongoing debate with different players is essential. Gupta's (2014) appeal to rethink authorship can be illuminating in this regard. Starting from the idea that the final product of research is highly mediated and "the results of labor of many different people" (p. 396), he proposes that contributions of different players need to be acknowledged. Above findings demonstrate that brokers become entangled in hierarchies of opportunities and expectations, and as Gupta (2014) and Middleton and Cons (2014) argue, inequalities always adhere in researcher-assistant relationships. Sufficiently acknowledging the role and responsibility of brokers could make their influence on the research project debatable and open to critical evaluation. At the same time, feelings of postcolonial guilt at the side of the ethnographer when hiring and paying a native broker may be put into perspective when brokers are attributed more responsibility and authorship. A practice of self-critique could moreover make brokers equally attentive for their own assumptions and strategies, and for the interests and lives of the research participants, urging them to act more ethically. To fully acknowledge brokers' role in research, one needs to realize that they make decisions, use strategies, and innovate the social space in which they operate, even when this space is severely restricted (Long and Long, 1992).

This idea will be further taken up in the last section that seeks to explain how brokers and their strategies are not only shaped by the context in which they broker, but how their position and strategies likewise shape this context. More specifically, it will be argued that research and strategies of brokers in this context reproduce the idea of war-affected people as vulnerable, and the war-affected context as problem-fraught.

The reproduction of war-affected people and war-affected environments

Through analysing the stories of brokers, this study also reflected on the indirect and more profound ethical concerns of research in a post-conflict context. These concerns probably not only apply to the role of brokers or research, but also to the humanitarian industry at large. Yet, it was the analysis of brokers' roles that provided room to raise concerns about the indirect impact of humanitarianism and conflict research from an ethical perspective.

During the interviews, brokers talked about war-affected people as if “those people” were very different from themselves. Upon prompting, they agreed that their lives had also been affected by the conflict, but the difference between them and “people in the community” was that they had been educated and are now working, while people in the community remain illiterate, poor and in need of external support. During the war, humanitarian aid was mostly delivered to the rural camps, while livelihoods in town transformed to a monetary economy (Branch, 2013). While most city-dwellers benefitted from the social and economic progress in northern Uganda, people in the villages, the main beneficiaries of humanitarian organizations, are still “used to hand-outs” and “suffer from the dependency syndrome”. Such developments led to skewed relationships between town and rural people, and while elderly rural people accused the humanitarian industry of corrupting the traditional values and promoting dependency among the people in the camps (Branch, 2013), brokers employed in this industry portrayed the communities as contexts fraught with problems, and thereby emphasized the contrast with life in town:

People in the community are people who really need help. They need a lot of help ... Here in town, people go to work, go to school. In the communities, people are just there. And they have a lot of problems.

Brokers deemed it the task of humanitarian organizations “to change their situations”, and research is considered indispensable for this, because only by conducting research one can know “the true problems of people in the community and come up with a solution”. It was within this discourse that a difference between “us” (the brokers) and “them” (the war-affected people) was created. And because brokers, as we have argued throughout this paper, fundamentally reshape and reconfigure fieldwork, shape fieldwork relationships and our notion of the field itself (Gupta, 2014; Middleton and Cons, 2014), such findings suggest how the praxis of research reproduces a dishonouring discourse of ‘the other’, i.e., war-affected people in need of assistance. The fact that most brokers keep brokering research, even when people in the communities have come to see research as irrelevant to their situations and denounced its ability to change their lives, says a lot about who defines which people have certain problems, and how such “problematized phenomena become *problematizations*, or foci for study” (Bacchi, 2012: 1). The narratives of brokers suggest that within a humanitarian context, where the state is hollowed out and opportunities for the educated middle-class change social values and relationships, problems of war-affected people become taken-for-granted, become *real*. Hoffmann (2014) argues that brokering positions provide political opportunities to spread certain narratives to the outside and thereby participate in a “global politics of truth” (p.11). The fact that brokers have a say in who

can speak, enable or occlude specific types of questions, decide what is translated, and contribute to processes of problematization, gives them the opportunity to counter popular depictions and perceptions of a war-affected society, or, instead, reproduce them. When war-affected people are portrayed as vulnerable and in need of help and a war-affected communities are considered fraught with problems, interventions of organizations, new research projects and the position of brokers is constantly legitimized. Regardless of the intentionality of such discourse, ethical concerns persist.

A reflexive ethical stance then entails that one should not only reflect upon how research is conducted, but also about its nature and purposes, about how phenomena come to be seen as true, about what drives the processes of otherness and problematization. While previous work on reflexive ethics would certainly underwrite such claims, the involvement of other players in research had rarely received any attention in these writings. It is in analysing the politics and ethics that underlie the taken-for-granted status of problem-fraught and vulnerable war-affected communities, researchers can understand and challenge the complex processes that produced such ideas. In becoming aware of their own unavoidable contribution in such processes, researchers and brokers can open up a much-needed dialogue about the political effects of their work on shaping people's lives (Bacchi, 2012)⁶.

Conclusion – towards a reflexive actor-oriented ethics

This paper examined the role of brokers in relation to ethics in research in the post-conflict context of northern Uganda. It argued that brokers operate within a social space imbued with opportunities for themselves, and expectations for other players in the field of research. In this complex space, brokers have to make decisions and use strategies to broker research. These strategies, such as silencing information or 'selling' research to participants, raise ethical concerns. The paper therefore argues for a reflexive ethical stance in which the position of brokers is fully taken into account. Reflexivity cannot be seen as an individual task and should be extended in a dialogue with other people involved. Moreover, writing brokers into a reflexive ethics goes beyond the brokering of research itself, as their discourses reveal how different stakeholders involved in research contribute to the construction of problems and the problematization of certain phenomena and ways of being. Likewise, the conversations of brokers suggested that research in the context of humanitarianism contributes to the problematization of war-affected people and environments, and reproduces notions of vulnerability and dependency. The paper thus advocates for an ethics that is highly demanding, reflexive and relational, ceaseless, deconstructive and empowering. One that far exceeds the desires of human research protocols. An ethics in which the role of brokers is recognized and no longer one of "anthropology's dirty little secrets" (Gupta, 2014). An ethics in which researchers can start a dialogue about brokers' views and strategies, about how they are entangled in complex power relationships, and about how what they do and don't matters to people's lives. Madison (2011) in her inspiring work on critical ethnography, draws on Levinas' "ethics of the other" to illustrate how to have a sense of other is to serve justice: "It is looking into the face of the Other that reveals the call to a

responsibility that is before any beginning, decision or initiative on my part” (p.97). And while such stance may reveal some uneasy truths, or while the postmodernist notion of reflexivity risks to become essentially destructive of the enterprise of research itself⁷, Davies (1999) aptly outlines the fundamental task of reflexive ethnographers:

[E]thnographers must seek to utilize creatively the insights of these postmodernist perspectives – insights that encourage incorporation of varying standpoints, exposure of the intellectual tyranny of metanarratives and recognition of the authority that inheres in the authorial voice – while at the same time rejecting the extreme pessimism of their epistemological critiques (p. 5).

The aim of this paper is not to reinvent ethical reflexivity, nor is it to explain how it should be done; there are numerous excellent resources available for that (Davies, 1999; Etherington, 2007; Guillemin and Gillam, 2004; Madison, 2011). Rather, the aim was to outline why and how brokers should be part of a reflexive ethical stance, and in doing so, make research more ethical and valuable for all players involved.

Notes

¹ According to the NGO forum in Gulu, about 500 organizations were active in Gulu in July 2014, including many organizations specifically targeting former child soldiers and other victims of the LRA.

² The use of the term ‘vulnerable groups’ is used mainly by NGOs and CBOs, and presumably not by those who are termed ‘vulnerable people’ themselves. I am aware of the fact that this label is imposed from outside, and when we use the word ‘vulnerable’ or ‘war-affected’ in this study, I refer to something that people are *called*, rather than *are*.

³ Someone gave me the useful advice to “follow the ‘American grad students’, you’ll find the right organizations”.

⁴ One of the participants preferred not to be audiotaped, which upon prompting seemed to be mostly stemming from a fear of being ‘interrogated’ instead of having a discussion (“Why don’t we just chat?”). The participant however agreed that I took notes, resulting into a detailed and useful source of data.

⁵ It may be (and probably is) true that brokers have their own diverse interests, and pursue opportunities, but approaching brokers as ‘rent-seekers’ provides limited analytical value, since it tells us little about the social and political circumstances in which they become (seen as) rent-seekers.

⁶ Illuminating here is also the literature of critical disability studies, a reaction against classical disability studies that have maintained the estrangement, objectification and marginalization of individuals with disabilities (e.g., Barton, 2005; Petersen, 2011; Vandekinderen et al., 2013)

⁷ Davis (1999) refers to the drawbacks of reflexivity, which can lead to self-absorption and essentially disable the act of research, because extensive reflection at times results in a radical relativity where knowing the other becomes impossible.

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