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Politically Sensitive Encounters: Ethnography, Access, and the Benefits of “Hanging Out”

Abstract Negotiating politically sensitive research environments requires both a careful consideration of the methods involved and a great deal of personal resolve. In drawing upon two distinct yet comparable fieldwork experiences, this paper champions the benefits of ethnographic methods in seeking to gain positionality and research legitimacy among those identified as future research participants. The authors explore and discuss their use of the ethnographic concept of “hanging out” in politically sensitive environments when seeking to negotiate access to potentially hard to reach participants living in challenging research environments. Through an illustrative examination of their experiences in researching commemorative rituals in Palestine and mental health in a Northern Irish prison, both authors reflect upon their use of “hanging out” when seeking to break down barriers and gain acceptance among their target research participants. Their involvement in a range of activities, not directly related to the overall aims of the research project, highlights a need for qualitative researchers to adopt a flexible research design, one that embraces serendipitous or chance encounters, when seeking to gain access to hard to reach research participants or when issues of researcher legitimacy are particularly pronounced, such as is the case in politically sensitive research environments.

Keywords Fieldwork; Ethnography; Hanging Out; Politically Sensitive Environments; Researcher Legitimacy

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There are many challenges facing the budding field worker hoping to conduct ethnographic research in conflicted or politically sensitive environments. Nordstrom and Robben’s (1995) edited volume reveals the risk ethnographers take, both personally and professionally, in order to voice the experiences of people and communities living in conflict regions. Meanwhile, more recent reflections on conducting research in “difficult circumstances” have highlighted the broader issues that researchers must contend with, including gaining access, negotiating security, overcoming suspicion, as well as at times managing an outsider identity, retaining objectivity and appreciating cultural sensitivity (Sriram et al. 2009). In addition, generating research legitimacy in areas widely regarded to be politically sensitive, both in terms of location and research substance, is said to be crucial (Knox 2001). Consequently, it has been argued by others who have conducted fieldwork in conflicted regions that research participants, and the communities of which they are part, act on what they see to be true rather than the paper credentials of the researcher (Sluka 1990; Shirlow and McEvoy 2008). In seeking to generate trust and rapport within politically sensitive environments, the issue of visibility in the eyes of those with whom the research is to be conducted becomes of crucial importance. Following these insights, the authors decided to reflect on their own experiences of seeking access to research sites that were politically sensitive, namely Palestine and a prison in the north of Ireland. Although markedly different, these two research contexts share a similar characteristic that designates them as politically sensitive to researchers: a cultural context of historic and current ethno-po-

litical violence. Fragmented culturally, socially, and politically, these environments raised pointed issues of identity and positionality that, at times, situated the researchers as suspicious “others”; they thus required careful consideration of their “presentation of self” (Goffman 1959). In turn, how they approached the field, their behavior within it, and the nature of their visibility thus became a crucial dimension in their personal and professional relationships with the people they engaged with. Critical reflection on separate experiences, with striking parallels, lead the authors to argue that “hanging out,” both as a method and a sensibility, enables researchers to build meaningful relationships, develop inter-personal rapport, and foster mutual trust with potentially reticent or reluctant research participants. Informal modes of engagement, we argue, thus act as a crucial precursor to gaining access to research sites that would otherwise be inaccessible if approached formally. “Hanging out,” the authors conclude, should then be viewed as a complimentary means of gaining access to politically sensitive research sites.

“Hanging out” has been considered a cornerstone of the ethnographic method, particularly within anthropology. Clifford Geertz (1998) coined the phrase *deep* “hanging out” to define the method of physical, informal, and prolonged immersion within a cultural environment in order to gather data. Typically then, “hanging out” has been conceived of instrumentally, that is, as a means to gather knowledge and insights, with participant-observation generally used to “understand acts and actors as much as possible from within their own frame of reference” (Yanow 2007:409). This can lead some to

view “hanging out” to be a relatively small element of the overall research design: “ethnographic work is only 5% visible fieldwork versus 95% preparation, analysis, synthesis, and communication” (Jordan and Dalal 2006:368). However, we argue that “hanging out” is not merely about data extraction, but a delicate process that plays a crucial role in establishing researcher’s positionality prior to and during fieldwork. As Kawulich (2011:65) notes: “striking up conversations with community members while ‘hanging out’ and becoming known as a regular helps the researcher establish a position with which others may become comfortable.” However, “hanging out” can also lead researchers to be regarded with suspicion, if their role is unclear and/or ambiguous, by actors in the field (see: Magolda 2000). Such a view has been long established, with Becker’s (1963) insights in the seminal text on the sociology of deviance particularly applicable. In environments of tension, or what we refer to as “politically sensitive” environments, the judged regularly view their judges as outsiders. In such situations, the researcher’s approach and behavior are vital in negating suspicion and developing rapport (see: Gustavson and Cytrynbaum 2003). Consequently, some researchers take active roles among the groups they research (Adler and Adler 1987; 2012), which in turn provides opportunities to engage with people informally, build trust, and gain access to research participants that may have otherwise been inaccessible or reticent to take part if approached formally (see: Bolognani 2007; Valentine 2007; Huschke 2013). The issues surrounding researcher’s positionality, the roles they adopt, their behaviors, and the actors they align with are particularly pertinent in political-

ly sensitive environments: cultural settings where there exists heightened concern over the motives of researchers and where research outputs can unintentionally have damaging repercussions for participants (see: Feenan 2002; Bell 2013). Drawing on these insights, the authors reflect on their own experiences of “hanging out,” not simply as a method to obtain information and knowledge, but as a precursory mode of engagement in order to facilitate access to politically sensitive research environments. They contest that “hanging out,” in the form of purposeful and meaningful engagement, can make the researcher visible and help them to establish a culturally appropriate identity that in turn erodes suspicion of them as researcher “other.” Comparing similar experiences in different settings not only adds strength to the authors’ general treatise but also illuminates the importance of being critically aware of the political context in which researchers seek to engage. The discussion begins with a journey to Palestine.

“Hanging Out” in Palestine

In 2010, Browne embarked on a period of fieldwork in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (hereinafter Palestine) in order to investigate the public performance of memory in a region famed for its instability in terms of regional conflict. Browne’s ongoing research explores the manner in which the annual *Nakba* commemorations on the 15th May are organized simultaneously by political elites as a means of strengthening a shared Palestinian identity, and also as events that are used as powerful tools of the downtrodden, particularly marginalized groups, including Palestinian refugees, and those who

represent them: Palestinian non-governmental organizations (PNGO’s). In designing the research framework, it was considered appropriate to focus solely on qualitative methods deriving from the ethnographic tradition: semi-structured interviews with those involved in the organization and delivery of the commemorations, and participant observations at the events, with a view to analyzing intra-group solidarity at the memorial practices as they played out in public. A database of potential research respondents had been gathered over the course of the previous year, aided by prior trips made to the region, considered best practice by others who have previously worked in conflict zones (Sluka 1990). Potential interviewees were targeted to cover a diverse range of perspectives from across civic and political society, including members of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), political parties (Fateh, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine [DFLP], and Hamas), Palestinian non-governmental organizations (PNGO’s), and Palestinian activist groups. This combination of methods, it was hoped, would generate the requisite “thick description” (Geertz 1973) needed to gain a deeper understanding of the negotiated construction of the selected commemorative events.

Palestine represents a politically sensitive environment in which to conduct research given the ongoing occupation and seemingly intractable nature of the conflict with the Israeli state. Similarly, the internally fractious nature of Palestinian political governance adds to the sensitivity in the region, with the land commonly referred to as Palestine (Pappe 2006) divided geographically in two: the

West Bank and Gaza Strip, both areas which (at the time of writing) are governed separately by the two most dominant rival political factions, Fateh and Hamas. In addition, a broad and ideologically diverse range of Palestinian political factions garner significant popular support across the region. All of which adds to the contested and factional nature of the political landscape in Palestine and helps to generate an atmosphere of justifiable suspicion which can result in outsider researchers having their research motives questioned (Norman 2009; Radsch 2009). The success of the research therefore hinged upon careful negotiation in order to gain access. Whereas other conflict researchers have championed the snowball sampling method (SSM) as a means of overcoming suspicion and mistrust in politically charged environments (Sluka 1990; Knox 2001; Cohen and Arieli 2011), the arguments both authors make is that whilst chain referral and SSM are important, gaining access in these selected politically sensitive environments involved significant periods of time spent “hanging out” in the areas of enquiry. For Browne, “hanging out” unquestionably aided in generating researcher legitimacy, helping to open the door to a wide range of research respondents, from Palestinian refugees to political elites.

In advance of arriving in Palestine, detailed letters explaining the aims and objectives of the research were sent to those respondents with whom Browne had targeted with a view towards smoothing the transition into the field and in an attempt to generate research legitimacy with intended research participants. These letters were sent on official headed notepaper from Queen’s

University Belfast and accompanying contact details of the supervisory team involved in overseeing the research. Despite seemingly meticulous advance preparation, all attempted correspondence fell on deaf ears. None of the letters sent were responded to. Similarly, it proved difficult to make contact with Palestinian political representatives and Palestinian non-governmental organizations via e-mail from behind a desk in Belfast. Such issues have been discussed in the literature focusing on the challenges associated with gaining access to elites in the Middle East (Radsch 2009); and it soon became apparent that official letters and e-mail communication were not a sufficient means to obtain trust or establish any form of rapport with targeted research participants. It would later become clear that communicating from afar was not appropriate given the politically sensitive nature of the research, and this was articulated as one of the reasons why Browne did not receive any advance communication. This was in stark contrast to previous research experience in Belfast in which “official” letters were a crucial means of generating researcher legitimacy resulting in gaining access to meetings with targeted respondents, many of whom were political elites. The result being, that upon arrival in the field, only a few “loose” contacts had been made, those gathered during previous fieldtrips, a situation one would consider unsatisfactory and daunting when seeking to begin a prolonged period of fieldwork.

For Browne, generating trust and rapport with groups and individuals in Palestine required a combination of perseverance, luck, and a reliance

on personal recommendation (*wasta*)¹ built up over time. As a result, of most importance were the enduring personal connections made during chance encounters whilst “hanging out” in public spaces. Ensuring a visible presence at as many public events as possible across the West Bank, where it was conceivable that a wide-range of potential research participants would be in attendance, was deemed crucial. This served the dual purpose of increasing personal familiarity with both the region itself, as well as with key stakeholders working on issues related to the research, namely, commemoration and refugee rights. As such, “hanging out” at events not directly linked to the research aims increased the likelihood of being recognized at future public memorial events. Ethnographic access, as others have shown (see: Atkinson and Hammersley 1994), is not limited to the moment of entry into a social world; it is an ongoing process (Woodward 2008:551). Following this, Gottlieb (2006) has highlighted the benefits of *advanced hanging out* as a way of building trust and developing rapport with potential research respondents. Embracing the concept of “hanging out,” however, also requires attention to cultural practices, for example, in the Middle East most informal conversations involve a cup of coffee (Norman 2009; Radsch 2009). For Browne, a caffeine addiction became an unavoidable, if not welcome, side-effect of this form of ethnographic practice. He would often spend mornings and afternoons “hanging out” with Palestinian

¹ Translated from Arabic, meaning “clout,” or more commonly known as “who you know.” It refers to one’s personal connections and in the situation described is used to refer to a form of chain referral used whilst spending time working in Palestine. For further discussion on the term and how it was useful when conducting research in the Middle East, see: Radsch (2009) and Norman (2009).

*Shabab*² in the coffee shops of Ramallah in an attempt to meet with as many politicized young men as possible. Chance encounters and faces that grew familiar led to discussions of politics and the upcoming *Nakba* commemorations. This initial embedding process, over a broken 6 month period, acted as the vital means of breaking down cultural barriers, which in turn aided in the generation of trust and researcher legitimacy in an area dogged by covert surveillance and intra-communal suspicion. If we agree, as both authors do, that the “epistemology of ethnography lies in the interaction between individuals and the subsequent reciprocity of perspectives between social actors in their natural environment” (Atkinson and Hammersley 1994:256), then it follows that culturally appropriate “hanging out” greatly aids the chance of generating positive and meaningful relationships with potential research respondents, leading ultimately to the requisite production of knowledge. This form of chance ethnographic encounter, whether serendipitous or not, generates researcher legitimacy, particularly in politically sensitive environments, leading to the strengthening of relationships between researcher and potential research participants. Thus allowing for more informed observation and analysis of the social environment in which one is hoping to conduct research and greatly increasing the likelihood of future participant compliance in potential interviews.

What Browne has previously referred to as the growing fetishism for research in conflicted or politically sensitive environments (Browne and

² Translated from Arabic, meaning “young men,” or “youth.”

Moffett 2014) has, in his experience, resulted in justifiable reluctance on behalf of local groups and individuals in Palestine to willingly engage in research projects with overly zealous and enthused researchers, some of whom foolishly promise the world in terms of dissemination of research findings and subsequent demonstrable change, but predictably deliver relatively little. Aspects of poor practice by researchers, including a failure to treat potential respondents who sacrifice time and emotional energy as active and reflexive participants in the research,³ have, in Browne’s experience rendered accessing respondents for research in Palestine, a more challenging endeavor. Heeding the advice of colleagues in Belfast, many of whom have been research participants engaged in studies relating to the conflict in Northern Ireland, Browne ensured his visibility in Palestine through active engagement in a wide range of socio-political activities, including becoming aligned to the leading Palestinian human rights NGO focusing on refugee and residency rights in the region,⁴ spending regular periods of time in their onsite library, and meeting with staff members in a non-formal manner (for a coffee, of course). Much time was spent travelling to and from Bethlehem, attending the offices of the NGO, and taking part in informal meetings at every opportunity with the result being the generation of familiarity between Browne as an outsider and staff in the NGO. This in turn helped to create a sense of trust and rapport with

³ For a useful discussion on this issue, see: Moe Ali Nayel’s reflections from Sabra refugee camp, Lebanon. “Palestinian Refugees Are Not at Your Service.” *The Electronic Intifada*. Retrieved December 05, 2014 (<http://electronicintifada.net/people/moe-ali-nayel>).

⁴ BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights.

members of staff whom Browne would later go on to interview formally for research purposes. The importance of this informal relationship building lay with the fact that Browne’s personal credentials and legitimacy as a researcher working in Palestine were vouched for (*wasta*) and subsequently extended to other likeminded individuals with whom he informally met. This greatly aided in expanding upon the initial network of research respondents identified, leading to a high profile invitation to attend a series of important political meetings, including the first meeting in March 2010 of the National High Committee for the Commemoration of the Nakba.

Despite attempts made to generate researcher legitimacy, on one occasion Browne’s position as an outsider in the region, that is, a non-Palestinian, proved an insurmountable barrier to gaining access despite the various personal recommendations made on his behalf. Such a failure stemmed from bureaucratic wrangling and an inability on behalf of Browne to convince them that he was best placed to properly research the *Nakba* commemorations from an outsider’s perspective. On this occasion, Browne was forced to abandon attempts to gather research participants together to explore the political and factional issues surrounding commemoration of the *Nakba* at a roundtable discussion he had planned. Whereas, for some, meeting with an Irish researcher in private was permissible, gathering to discuss contentious issues, such as refugee rights and the right of return, with someone who was an outsider facilitating intra-group dialogue was considered inappropriate. Through this process Browne realized that although “hanging out” could open many

doors during his time in the field, ultimately *wasta* was circumscribed by the fractious political context, the backdrop against which the work was being conducted. Although not detrimental to the overall aims of the research, the collapse of the proposed roundtable discussion resulted in much personal reflection as recorded in a series of research diaries meticulously kept whilst engaged in fieldwork.⁵

“Hanging Out” in Prison

In 2011, McBride began investigating personality disorder policy and practice within Northern Ireland’s criminal justice system (see: DHSSPS 2010). “Personality disorder” is a diagnosable mental health disorder (see: WHO 1992; APA 2000) that 60-80% of the prison population is said to have (DHSSPS 2010). The goal of the research was not traditional in orientation, that is, aimed at evaluating the relative success of the implementation of the policy (see: Fischer, Miller, and Sidney 2007; Hill 2009; Thissen and Walker 2013), but interpretative (see: Yanow 2007), that is, aimed at investigating the way policy acts as a discursive “meaning-making” device. To probe the meaning-making around personality disorder, McBride employed a policy-ethnography research design (see: Shore and Wright 1997; Schatz 2009; Shore, Wright, and Però 2011). This consisted of participant observation, semi-structured interviews with key actors, for example, (ex)prisoners, mental health service users, healthcare staff, prison staff, as well as policy-makers, and document analysis. However, gaining access inside prisons in order

⁵ The benefits of which have been espoused in other recently published works on conducting research in politically sensitive regions (Browne 2013).

to conduct participant observation presents a difficult challenge as prisons across the world have been experienced as inaccessible, opaque, and constraining environments by researchers who have had to negotiate risk adverse ethical review committees, challenges of influential gatekeepers, and strict security procedures (see: Rhodes 2001; Wacquant 2002; Waldram 2009).

Accessing “behind the gate” in Northern Ireland has been even more challenging for researchers due to the 30 years of ethno-political conflict, which transformed Northern Ireland’s prisons into sites of ideological warfare (Feldman 1991). During the 1980s, the UK government’s policy of internment without trial tripled the prison population, political prisoners embarked on a hunger strike that resulted in the deaths of ten Republican prisoners, and prison officers became legitimate targets of political violence. This series of events, in effect, made prisons a “no-go” area for researchers and produced a security focused culture within Northern Ireland’s Prison Service (NIPS) that continues today (Shirlow and McEvoy 2008; PRT 2011). Consequently, little to no ethnographic research has been conducted in Her Majesty’s Prison (HMP) Maghaberry, Northern Ireland’s largest and only maximum security prison.

Gaining access to HMP Maghaberry, as part of an ethnographic investigation of mental health policy and practice within Northern Ireland’s criminal justice system, therefore presented a daunting task for McBride. It began with a lengthy application process with ORECNI, the Research Ethics Service within the Northern Ireland’s Health and Social

Care System/National Health Service (NHS). The three and a half month process included completing a 57-page online form, writing an 18-page research protocol, which had to be peer-reviewed by two academics, as well as submitting McBride’s curriculum vitae along with those of my academic supervisors. Once approval was obtained, in a similar vein to Browne above, McBride sought access by requesting a formal meeting with prison management. This was accepted and a meeting was held with a senior manager of the NIPS and a senior governor of HMP Maghaberry in March 2012. A frank conversation over a cup of coffee revealed openness to the research; the timing was said to be *impeccable* and the topic *excellent*. The fact that the project focused on a Department of Health policy, and could potentially support the development of services within the prison, appeared beneficial. However, despite the willingness of management to facilitate the research, there was an obvious ethical and practical conundrum for both parties: in what capacity could McBride enter the prison? Prisons are not an average ethnographic environment as most people the researcher will interact with have lost their liberty. Prisoners’ everyday actions, for example, eating, using the telephone, exercising, et cetera, are regulated by rules and procedures. There is thus an ethical conundrum of informed consent and the risk of unintentional coercion. To simply insert McBride into the environment to observe prisoners and staff was simply out of the question.

One means of circumnavigating this ethical conundrum was for McBride to enter the prison on a voluntary basis and deliver a skill-based activity,

such as a reading or writing course. This would legitimize his position within the prison and enable prisoners (and staff) to decide whether they wanted to engage with him by choosing to participate in the activity. Subsequently, McBride hoped such a role would help him to develop meaningful relationships with prisoners and staff in such a way that was not considered intrusive or invasive. However, despite his university education, McBride’s lack of formal training qualifications proved to be a bureaucratic hurdle. Although this formal approach had made the research(er) visible to senior management staff, a point not to be discounted, ultimately they had more pressing concerns than develop a niche voluntary role for an enthusiastic researcher.

Like Browne above, what ultimately unlocked the prison gates was a mixture of luck, perseverance, and McBride’s willingness to “hang out” at public events. In the month following the meeting, April 2012, McBride attended a conference focused on personality disorder. Flagrant self-promotion at the time of coffee and lunch breaks during this two-day conference led to an invitation to join Northern Ireland’s Regional Personality Disorder Strategy Implementation Group (RPDIG). This group, which met on a monthly basis, brought together operational staff from across health and criminal justice agencies in charge of developing personality disorder services across Northern Ireland. These meetings provided a window into the way in which the strategy was being implemented on a regional basis across Northern Ireland and also led McBride to be invited to visit HMP Maghaberry by a healthcare professional. An initial visit,

in May 2012, was highly insightful, yet there was still no obvious role McBride could adopt. However, over the next five months, McBride attended monthly RPDIG meetings and other policy events, such as training courses. Regular participation at such events made McBride visible to the “policy community” and enabled him to establish an identity, somewhat dubiously, as a research expert. Favorably, the British and Irish Group for the Study of Personality Disorder’s (BIGSPD) annual conference was due to be held in Belfast in February 2013. McBride’s willingness to participate led to him being asked to co-facilitate an art exhibition. The art work would be produced by prisoners who utilized a mental health day center in HMP Maghaberry, and later publically displayed in conjunction with the BIGSPD conference. With a “local champion,” and support from prison management, negotiating the complex array of bureaucratic procedures required to gain security clearance was in actuality relatively straightforward. Perseverance, a degree of fortune, willingness to engage, and support from others thus presented an opportunity for McBride to gain access to HMP Maghaberry from the ground up.

With access came a practical challenge, namely, McBride’s positionality in relation to prisoners and staff. Early on, McBride decided that it was vital to maintain an independent identity in attempt to not be too closely identified or aligned with either inmates or staff due to the hierarchical and conflictual nature of the prison environment. Fostering a neutral identity, devoid of institutional allegiances, McBride felt, would in turn enable him to build trust among both prisoners and staff. The

voluntary role as an art facilitator therefore presented the ideal opportunity to carve out a position within the existing hierarchy that was anomalous. Nevertheless, much still depended on the way in which McBride *performed* this role.

Between October 2012 and February 2013, McBride visited HMP Maghaberry 15 times in the capacity as art facilitator for between two and four hours at a time. Art classes were held in the day center each Friday morning for two hours. McBride would arrive at the center before the prisoners in order to set up the art. This also offered an opportunity to get to know staff when prisoners were not around. Fortuitously, the art class coincided with “Friday fry-ups”; an initiative designed to coax prisoners out of their cells with a traditional breakfast fry and over to the day center. This provided McBride not only with a hearty meal but also an opportunity to sit and talk with prisoners about life in prison, his research, football results and also encourage them to take part in the art project. The majority of the time McBride spent in the art room working on pieces *with* prisoners. Drawing, painting, and molding clay together facilitated conversations about personal or sensitive issues that some of the art work sought to provoke. On occasion, McBride swapped the paint brush for a pool cue or table tennis racket to play a game with whoever the reigning champion was. When the prisoners left at lunch time, McBride would stay to tidy up the art room and again chat with staff.

The role of art facilitator thus provided an opportunity for McBride to engage with prisoners and staff in a designated position that legitimated his pres-

ence. Open and honest about his underlying motivation for volunteering, to research mental health in prison and get a feel for the experience of prison, McBride developed a niche identity within the day center. The temporal and spatial restrictions of McBride’s presence made it an unconventional and, to some extent, formalized mode of “hanging out,” and is thus better conceived as a *sensibility*. Informal in dress and appearance, McBride stuck out from uniformed staff and was often mistaken for a prisoner by visitors to the day center. Meanwhile, his cultural familiarity, having grown up in Belfast, meant he was able to relate with many prisoners; predominately young men from inner city areas. Thus McBride was able to establish an anomalous position within the established prison hierarchy. In this way, McBride built meaningful relationships with prisoners and staff alike. Prolonged visibility combined with a relatively unorthodox means of engaging with everyone within the day center led McBride to establish an identity beyond that of “researcher” and helped him to garner trust with those he engaged with (see: Waldram 2009). Becoming a person rather than merely a researcher proved essential in recruiting staff, who were initially wary of McBride’s motives, to conduct semi-structured interviews. This in turn led to a further 10 visits to HMP Maghaberry to conduct interviews, gather more observations, and get involved in other initiatives.

For McBride, “hanging out” thus enabled him to become a visible and trusted actor within the personality disorder policy community, as well as the prison environment. Deep “hanging out,” that is, attendance at conferences, participation

at meetings, personal conversations around the art table, as well as observations of the interactions between different groups of actors, provided a wealth of information and data that provided a window into the way in which personality disorder shapes perceptions, identities, and—ultimately—impacts, either implicitly or explicitly, on people’s lives. However, “hanging out” was not just a method of knowledge production, but became a sensibility that enabled McBride to establish his positionality within the field. As espoused by Browne above, “hanging out” enabled McBride to develop a legitimized identity within multiple social arenas that eroded suspicion of him as researcher “other” and facilitated access into an environment that has historically been a “no-go” area for researchers. The benefits of McBride’s approach have subsequently been illuminated by two colleagues engaged in research projects aimed at eliciting the experiences of prison staff, both of whom have found gaining access to be a major problem (one due to bureaucratic hurdles, the other due to problems recruiting participants). Although it would be naive to suggest that there are no other factors at play, it is relevant to note that both have attempted to gain access to interviewees through purely “official” routes and neither has used immersion within the prison environment as a means to gain access. For McBride, “hanging out” made him a visible actor, while his engagement revealed his personality to other actors; this in turn enabled him to develop trust and rapport with potentially suspicious actors that ultimately facilitated the gathering of data that may not otherwise have been possible had he simply approached the research field formally.

Conclusion

The experiences shared above, in research conducted in two diverse but equally politically sensitive environments, champion the benefits of “hanging out” in order to strengthen researcher legitimacy and ultimately gain access to hard-to-reach environments and potential research respondents who may be reticent to participate. The examples discussed reveal that “hanging out” in highly charged political environments greatly aided Browne and McBride’s ability to negotiate complex issues concerning access by engaging with potential research participants in an informal manner. In politically sensitive environments in which ulterior motives of the researcher are commonly suspected, this form of *ad hoc* ethnographic research practice generates researcher and participant familiarity, which in turn, we suggest, helps to alleviate mistrust and suspicion. For both authors, diverse and informal means of engagement, that is, attending public events, drinking coffee, and picking up a paint brush, allowed the researchers to circumnavigate the barriers that formal mechanisms, such as written requests for meetings, had presented. This in turn enabled them as researchers to establish a role within these highly charged, politically sensitive environments. Developing visible positions within the research environment enabled both researchers to move beyond an identity of detached, and to some extent unwelcome, observer to a position of engaged actor that facilitated the development of meaningful relationships, facilitated mutual trust, and enhanced the researcher’s legitimacy. We argue this in turn aided in accessing other poten-

tial research respondents through chain referral or snowball sampling methods, strengthening the understanding of the lived realities and everyday lives of those research participants who willingly gave up their time and energy to be involved in the research, with the outcome being that the researcher’s standing within the research environment and among the research participants was greatly enhanced. To the extent that both Browne and McBride would argue that those taking part in their research had a greater degree of interest in the research findings and outputs as a result.⁶

In championing the merits of this form of ethnographic practice, both authors are persuaded by the views shared by Jordan and Dalal (2006) who have previously argued:

[w]hat is required is an educational effort that makes clear that what looks like “just talking” or “just hanging out with those guys” is part of a rigorous methodology that worries about such things as validity and reliability and sample size and rival hypotheses. More critically, it entails accruing layers of experience through time by observing a range of phenomena across different sites. [p. 368]

However, in expanding upon their arguments, we suggest that “hanging out” assumes even great-

⁶ In May 2012, Browne returned to Palestine to present research findings gained as a result of time spent working in the region. He invited a number of those with whom he had closely worked with, including some who had been interviewed for the research to attend. Similarly, McBride, in conjunction with ex-prisoners, has organized a number of public exhibitions of the artwork produced in HMP Maghaberry. This highlights the close and enduring personal relationships both authors have retained with those whom they conducted the research.

er potential when the credibility and legitimacy of the researcher is under question, as is often the case when the research is conducted against the backdrop of ongoing or a history of sustained intra/inter-community conflict. We do not share these experiences as a means of providing a blueprint of how to gain access in politically sensitive environments—indeed, for some, bureaucratic or “official” channels may be sufficient—rather we provide them in order to highlight the potential benefits of “hanging out” as a means of generating researcher legitimacy and ultimately creating meaningful relationships with research participants in politically sensitive environments, many of whom remain highly marginalized or hard-to-reach populations (Cohen and Arieli 2011).

One final note would be to highlight that whilst there is no way of prescribing how researchers should “hang out” in politically sensitive environments, it is imperative that researchers are mindful of the ethical ramifications of their engagement with research participants, as well as the political repercussions of the publication of potentially sensitive research findings. In the absence of a rigorous checklist of do’s and don’ts, one is forced to rely on a personal sensibility and sensitivity to perseverance, luck, and proactive engagement. Therefore, we close in saying that engaged ethnography has benefits, but can be a challenging and daunting proposition. Ultimately, “hanging out” requires time, patience, and the personal resilience to render every challenging fieldwork encounter a research opportunity.

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