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Whose Stories, Whose Voices, Whose Narratives?

Challenging the Western Gaze on Afghanistan – Exploring Ethical Knowledge Co-Production in Afghanistan

An Afghan encounters a foreigner (kharijee) on the street and greets him: "Hello, my friend, when did you arrive to our beautiful country?"
The foreigner replies: "Yesterday."
The Afghan then asks: "How long will you stay my friend?"
The foreigner replies: "Until tomorrow."
The Afghan then notes: "Oh, my friend, this is a very short time, what did you come to do?"
The foreigner replies: "To write a book."
The Afghan, now puzzled, asks: "Tell me my friend, what is the book about?"
The foreigner replies: "Afghanistan: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow."

I do not remember exactly when a friend first told me this anecdote, but it has stayed with me for at least a decade, as an apt parable of how many Afghans view the production of knowledge about their country. Around the same time, another good friend half-jokingly asked me when I was going to write my book on Afghanistan. When I hesitated and told him the joke, he laughed and added: "Well, at least you would have something to say, given the time you have spent here." Although I was flattered by my friend's comment, I knew it was also tongue-in-cheek, and it deepened my anxiety about ever writing a book about Afghanistan. If I ever wrote a book, I had decided, I would open it with this anecdote, because I felt that humour – in the form of jokes or short anecdotes, sometimes in the form of poetry – was a way in which Afghans tended to convey meaning and describe reality better than I ever could. More recently, humour or storytelling has been identified as a form of "discursive resistance" or "mockery employed as a form of discipline or rebelling."[1]

Indeed, there are many jokes in Afghanistan, some of them even told among foreigners, one of which is that an Afghanistan expert is an oxymoron – impossible and contradictory, or that the self-assessment of one's expertise on Afghanis-

1 Fluri 2019, 125.

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tan is disproportionate to the length of time spent in the country.[2] So I struggle to call myself an expert on Afghanistan, knowing full well the limits of my expertise. Like Goethe's Faust, the more I knew, the more I came to appreciate what I did not know, and perhaps also what I could never know. This is to acknowledge that my very nature as a non-Afghan, "keeps me in the 'gap'"[3] between my own knowledge and experience and that of Afghan citizens. I may have increased my knowledge and understanding over two decades of working with my Afghan colleagues, but my gaze will remain that of an outsider looking in.

Needless to say, I have not yet written that book, and I am not sure I ever will, so I use this joke here to illustrate what I see as a growing resentment among many Afghans about how knowledge about their country is produced. This was particularly evident during the international state-building project after 2001, when research on Afghanistan proliferated, driven by short-term policy-oriented research "reminiscent of the empirical positivism of the colonial gazetteers," replacing in-depth and analysis and longitudinal observation of Afghanistan.[4]

Afghan citizens have also begun to challenge this form of externalised knowledge production, in which they are relegated to the margins of their own story, as 'local flavour,' voices of those affected, or 'raw data,' but not as experts. I have seen this time and time again over the past two decades of working on and in Afghanistan, where I have had the great privilege of working with local organisations alongside Afghan colleagues who have helped me to better understand their country, as well as the limits of my own knowledge. This pushback against Western knowledge production is in line with Edward Said's seminal critique of Orientalism[5], as well as more recent scholarship that questions how Western, colonial and empirical scholarship has shaped and distorted knowledge about Afghanistan.[6]

In this article, I use a form of autoethnography to offer my "reflective ruminations"[7] on various experiences and encounters I have had while working in and about Afghanistan. This means that I also bring my emotions to bear,[8] including acknowledging the discomfort and "sitting with the mess" that often

2 This is also known as the Dunning-Kruger effect, which describes the overconfidence that comes with limited knowledge and expertise, see Dunning et al. 2003.

3 See Kearney 2020, 68 who discussed this in relation to the 'gap' between her knowledge and experiences and that of the Indigenous mob she researched with.

4 Monsutti 2013a, 275.

5 Said 1978.

6 See Zeweri 2022; Manchanda 2020; Hanifi 2011.

7 See Butz and Besio 2009.

8 Meloni 2020.

comes with working in the field and which, through reflection helps us grow as researchers.[9] I offer my observations and reflections in the form of vignettes or spotlights (or as I see it, a series of rabbit holes) to illustrate my journey and what has influenced my thinking about how we can achieve a more honest and ideally collaborative process of knowledge production. This is a nod to the rich Afghan tradition of storytelling.

In my reflections, I also draw on critical questions about ethical knowledge production raised by Linda Tuhiwai Smith in her seminal book *Decolonizing Methodologies*[10], as some of them had indeed been on my mind while working in Afghanistan: "Whose research is it? Who owns it? Whose interests does it serve? Who will benefit from it? Who has designed its questions and framed its scope? Who will carry it out? Who will write it up? How will its results be disseminated?"[11] I do not answer all these questions directly, but try to use them as a guide or framework, and end by highlighting signposts that I believe need to be considered in order to improve research collaboration and the co-production of knowledge about Afghanistan between Afghans and outsiders like myself. These are: *respecting the embodied expertise and oral tradition of Afghan researchers; storytelling as a collaborative research practice; treating research as relational and an exercise in trust, as well as conversational and contextual.*

Outsider Positionality – Challenging the External White European Gaze

I have always had a great deal of curiosity and, as my grandmother used to say, I was too 'nosy' for my own good. According to my aunt, I always asked too many questions. Ever since I was a little girl, I've loved observing other people's lives. Sitting on a train or walking through a city, I would look at houses and wonder about the stories of the people who lived in them, what they did, how they felt and what they talked about. It is this external gaze, coupled with an enormous curiosity, that I bring to my research and to this chapter.

9 Lenette 2020.

10 Smith 2012. The book's first edition was published in 1999 and a more recent third edition was published in 2021. I reference the second edition here.

11 Smith 2012, 43–44.

As I draw on autoethnographic reflections, or perhaps the practice of "reflexive ethnography,"[12] along with Said's notion of Orientalism[13], it is important that I first position myself in order to contextualise what I am writing. Being aware of one's positionality and reflecting on how it relates to power and privilege, as well as the (dis)advantages that come with it, are cornerstones to understanding the impact one has on the research context and process.[14] As Fujii notes, "to enter another's world as a researcher is a privilege, and not a right," which comes with an enormous responsibility to wrestle with ethical dilemmas; "and when taken seriously, it may be one of the most important benefits we have to offer those who make our work possible."[15] In the next few paragraphs, I will consider two aspects of my positionality: *who I am* as a person (which influences how I might be perceived), but also *how I am* as a person, including my belief systems (e.g., the desire to act with empathy) and my emotions.[16]

Drawing on Said, I must first acknowledge that, as a German, I come to the Orient – here Afghanistan – first as a European, and second as an individual,[17] and therefore with some heavy baggage. This "invisible knapsack," a term coined by Peggy McIntosh,[18] was introduced to me by the First Nations scholar Lauren Tynan when we taught together at UNSW Sydney. It has become a useful metaphor for me to think about what I bring to the field. Reflexivity helps me to make the contents of this knapsack more visible. By engaging with it, I have come to see it not just as weighty baggage that I need to manage carefully, but also as containing useful tools that have helped me to become a better and perhaps also more honest researcher.

I am a white female researcher born in southern Germany to a father whose family came from Bavaria and to a mother whose family came from Westphalia, and I grew up in different parts of Franconia, as my family moved around quite a lot. This nuance is important, because as the daughter of an essentially 'mixed marriage,' I was often confronted with the question 'you're not from here, are you' when I arrived at a new school, simply because I did not sound like a local (we spoke High German at home because of my mother). This experience made me realise early on that context matters, and that context is very local. I came to appreciate the intense nature of the 'tribalism' that still exists in modern

12 See Kearney and Bradley 2020.
13 See Fasavalu and Reynolds 2019.
14 See England 1994.
15 Fujii 2012, 722.
16 See Pettit 2006.
17 See Said 1978, 11.
18 See McIntosh 1989; McIntosh 2015.

Germany. I also learnt early on what it means to be an 'outsider,' or at least to be perceived as such, and the discomfort that comes from not fully belonging.

As a German, I also grew up with the baggage of Nazi history and the Holocaust, or as I tell my students, growing up on the 'wrong' side of history. This means that I have learned to sit with a great deal of discomfort and guilt about the fact that my ancestors having committed genocide and other crimes against humanity. Acknowledging and essentially owning this aspect of my positionality, and the discomfort that comes with it, has made me a humbler and, hopefully, more empathetic researcher. I understand that there is no predetermined way of being and acting, and that no society has warmongering as an inherent part of its DNA (something I had repeatedly heard about the Germans). This has helped me to 'other' Afghans less, and to understand that conflict and inhumanity can co-exist with cooperation, kindness, and peaceful progress.

I also come from a place of privilege, having had access to higher education, although not in a straightforward way. I started my social work studies at a technical university and went on to do an MA and PhD at a US university on a partial, albeit prestigious, Fulbright scholarship. Having had to work hard for my education, and considering myself lucky to have obtained a PhD, has made me humble about the privilege of being able to further my knowledge. Throughout my education, Goethe's Faust, which I read at school, was always at the forefront of my mind, his agony over knowledge a reminder that, despite all we learn, there is always more to learn, and much knowledge may remain beyond our reach. As I mentioned before, after two decades of research on Afghanistan, I honestly have the feeling that I have barely scratched the surface. There is still so much to learn, unlearn and discover.

My initial training as a social worker taught me reflexivity and exposed me to the influential work of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*[19], which introduced me to critical perspectives and activist scholarship. I was also introduced to the work of Paul Watzlawick[20] and the notion that 'reality' is essentially constructed, if not even invented, and the importance of paying attention to how communication can work to obstruct meaning. For example, I have reflected elsewhere on my lack of adequate fluency in either of Afghanistan's two national languages (Dari and Pashto), especially in contrast to other research contexts, such as Mexico, where I spoke the language and thus had comparatively greater access.[21] I still need the help of a translator during my research when I want to

19 Freire 1971, when his 1968 book was first translated into German.
20 Watzlawick 1976 and 1981.
21 See Schmeidl 2020.

go beyond very basic conversations. This means that I may inadvertently miss nuances, or that the meaning I take away is the result of what the research participant said, the translation provided, and my understanding at the time. However, I am grateful that my basic language skills, coupled with the active listening and observation skills I learned during my social work training, helped me to follow the general thrust of the conversation and to recognise when parts were left out in the translation.

I could go on unpacking my positionality, such as how being raised in a religious family gave me respect for religious knowledge and the importance of religion in people's lives,[22] or how being a woman has made me more aware of the power imbalances and constraints that come with patriarchy,[23] but I don't want to be too indulgent either. What I have tried to demonstrate is the importance of ongoing reflexivity as a way of facilitating ongoing engagement with one's own biography and how it interacts with the research context, the people who inhabit it, and the process of knowledge production.

Importantly, however, despite my commitment to reflexivity, it was a move to Australia and to an Australian university that brought me into contact with indigenous and decolonial methodologies and scholars engaged with them, that accelerated my learning journey and significantly enriched my thinking. I would like to acknowledge the most important ones. First Nation scholars Jessica Russ-Smith, Lauren Tynan, and Professor Megan Davis, and three academics of European descent, like myself, who have chosen to engage differently with Indigenous and local knowledge: Linda Bartolomei, Amanda Kearney, and Nicholas Apoifis.[24] As I mentioned earlier, at the same time I came across the work of Linda Tuhiwai Smith, who draws on the work of Edward Said.[25]

All of these encounters opened my eyes and mind to different ways of knowing, different ways of producing knowledge and the power of decolonising methodologies. Suddenly, I was pushing against the boundaries of Western methodologies and beginning to explore a more place-based form of knowledge production. I also began to better understand the methodological struggles I had experienced while working with two local organisations in Afghanistan. To this day, I regret that instead of being bold and proud of the different way of doing research that my Afghan colleagues and I had developed together, I stopped at describing what

22 See Schmeidl 2007.

23 See Schmeidl 2020.

24 There are others I should also acknowledge, such as Tanya Jakimow and Caroline Lenette, those mentioned were the most important in influencing my perspective at the time.

25 Smith 2012.

we were doing and felt the need to justify (possibly apologise for) our approach to research and knowledge production when it differed from Western methodologies. I later found out that of course I was by no means alone in feeling the need to explain myself, as this is the somewhat unfair labour expected of those working outside Western research paradigms.[26]

It was the engagement with my new colleagues in Australia and the more recent encounters facilitated by the co²libri project, to which one of the co-editors of this book, Andrea Fleschenberg, invited me, that gave me the courage to write this chapter, which is far more experimental than anything I have written before. Although I do so with a great deal of anxiety about not doing justice to the scholars I am referring to, and in particular to Afghan ways of knowing and doing research.

Of Extractive Research and the Use of Afghan Knowledge as "Secondary" – Making Knowledge Co-Production Visible

Research, by its very nature, is always extractive, seeking information and insights from others. This "stealing of stories" has not gone unnoticed, indeed it has been challenged by research participants,[27] and attention has increasingly turned to the co-production of knowledge as an ethical practice.[28] I would like to share some anecdotes of extractive research practices – as witnessed by myself or told to me by Afghan colleagues – that treat Afghan knowledge as secondary or as a form of 'raw data,' essentially rendering their expertise invisible.

I vividly recall a conversation I had with an Afghan colleague and friend in which he recounted an experience he had had with a Western researcher. I share this anecdote with his permission. He had taken the researcher to one of the provinces where the organisation he was working with was also conducting research and had arranged interviews for the researcher. In other words, he provided access and facilitated the research process, sometimes called research brokering[29]. However, his support went further: he also engaged in a longer discussion about the context and what they were hearing from research participants,

26 See Bessarab and Ng'andu 2010.
27 Pittaway, Bartolomei and Hugman 2010.
28 See Lenette 2022.
29 Baaz and Utas 2019.

sharing his analysis and insights. Later, when he saw the published outcome of the research – and my understanding is that there had been no further exchange since the visit – not only had his research brokering not been acknowledged, but he also felt that his analysis and insights had been incorporated into the research product without him being credited. My friend told me how he felt upset, violated, essentially stripped naked, and all I could do was share my outrage at what had happened.

I wish such experiences were isolated, but I am afraid they are quite common. In another case, another Western researcher approached the local organisation I was working with for help in gaining access to research participants (knowledge brokering). An Afghan colleague helped a great deal with this, including having long conversations with this particular Western researcher. When the report was published, I noticed that there was no acknowledgement of the local organisation or my colleague for their contributions to the research product. When I pointed this out, the Western researcher argued that there was not enough space in the acknowledgements section to acknowledge everyone who had helped him (although he did find space to acknowledge his girlfriend at the time), and insisted that my Afghan colleague was listed as one of the people he had interviewed, so was indeed 'acknowledged,' albeit as 'raw data,' a mere footnote to the larger story produced by the Western researcher. I am still angry about this experience, as I felt responsible for allowing the Western researcher to exploit my colleagues in this way.

It is possible that in both cases the Western researchers acted 'unintentionally,' having been trained in the Western imperial research tradition, which creates a hierarchy between "a white knower and an Indigenous subject to be known."[30] Regardless of intention, the practice of knowledge extraction over knowledge co-production is increasingly challenged by First Nations and Global South scholars as leading to "disembodied expertise," divorced from the standpoint and ontology of the knower and ultimately "the raced and gendered body attached" to it.[31] It is disrespectful to the knowledge and knowledge holders (experts) based in or from Afghanistan. Extractive research is similar to the 'fly-in, fly-out' (FIFO) practice used in the extractive sector, so perhaps it is appropriate to speak of FIFO researchers. I will do so for the remainder of this chapter, in the hope of contributing to a much-needed dialogue about how we do research. However, if I am being completely honest, there is a nagging question in the back of my mind about how often I myself might have been involved in extractive

30 Moreton-Robinson 2004, acknowledged in Tynan and Bishop 2019, 223.
31 Tynan and Bishop 2019, 223.

research. After all, I could not have conducted research in Afghanistan without the help of Afghan colleagues, friends, translators, elders, and many others.[32] It is perhaps this concern that has led me down this path of thinking about better ways of collaborating in research.

I was heartened recently when an Afghan scholar on a panel about the fall of Kabul challenged this use of Afghans as anecdotal witnesses to their history, rather than recognising them as scholars capable of analysis and theory. A few months later, however, I was again disheartened when I had to apologise profusely to an Afghan intellectual whom I had invited to a workshop where the white Western scholar was treated as the 'expert' and my Afghan colleague as essentially a local flavour. My Afghan colleague reported that he felt he had to be 'careful' about what he said because he was expected to provide 'lived experience' rather than expertise. I was devastated because I wanted him to be there because of the depth of his expertise, which was greater than that of the Western researcher. To me, he was the only expert in the room. However, in the workshop setting, I observed that some of the participants seemed to perceive him as the supporting act. For me, this underscores how entrenched the unconscious bias is in Global North institutions to see Global South scholars as subjects of research rather than agents of knowledge production, and this will not be changed simply by inviting Afghan expertise into the room. We need to identify and challenge such unconscious biases in order to change them.

What Indigenous Methodologies Teach Us about Acknowledging Afghan Ways of Knowledge Production

In my research collaborations with local organisations and researchers in Afghanistan, we worked hard to adapt our research practice to the context, and recorded this process in a methodological note that grew in length over time. Because I saw this as an important ethical practice, I was struck by a question from a visiting researcher: "Why on earth do you write such long methodology sections? All these disclaimers just make people doubt the quality of your research, which is very good. Look at other research that might only have one paragraph about their methodology, if that." This comment, although well-intentioned, still makes me

32 See Schmeidl 2020.

angry, although perhaps for different reasons now than when I first heard it. I was angry then because I felt that our approach was the right one, and indeed that other researchers should give more detail about how they did their research so that their findings could be better judged. I often felt that a thin methodology was an indication that individuals wanted the reader to trust the results because they were experts, rather than because of the quality of their research, and therefore spoke with more authority than they perhaps should have. I now realise that part of the reason I was angry was because our methodology section was written in the language of research limitation rather than framing it as an Afghan way of doing research, indeed a uniquely Afghan epistemology. This set me on a journey to decolonise my own research approach and to engage in a process of unlearning, and relearning.[33]

In the following signpost sections, I outline a series of experience-based lessons. For me, these are the coordinates of my ethical research compass, which I continue to refine through reflexivity and engagement with Indigenous and decolonising methodologies. Like others before me, I combine Western and Indigenous methodologies where it makes sense.[34] I see these learnings as stepping stones to developing better and more equitable research collaborations. Although I have tried to divide these learnings into different signposts, they are very much interrelated, as will become clear.

Signpost 1: Respecting Afghan Researchers' Embodied Expertise and Oral Tradition

Indigenous methodology emphasises that "as researchers, we not only develop new knowledge but also build our knowledge on the existing works of others by expanding and enriching established research and research methodologies, giving us a deeper understanding of the human lived experience and the world around us."[35] This treats Indigenous communities as holders of knowledge – not raw data – and must be respected. The question then becomes: how do we take into account and recognise (i.e. show respect for) the enormous expertise that our Afghan colleagues bring to the research process?

33 See Datta 2018.
34 See ibid., 3.
35 Geia, Hayes and Usher 2013, 13.

In my search for answers, I came across two academic contributions that addressed this very issue. The first was an editorial in a special issue of *Civil Wars* on "Research Brokers in Conflict Zones" by Maria Eriksson Baaz and Mats Uta,[36] and the second was an article by Kaitlin Fertaly and Jennifer Fluri on "Producing Knowledge in Fieldwork."[37] Both articles argue that local research collaborators are too often overlooked and rarely get the recognition they deserve in academic publications. Baaz and Uta argue that many research brokers go beyond "facilitating research or gathering certain data [and] often become the eyes and ears of researchers, thus exercising a large influence on the latters' grids of intelligibility, shaping not only the way in which they make sense of certain phenomena, but also what they see in the first place."[38] Similarly, Fertaly and Fluri outline the "complex and at times complicated role and influence" that research associates have on data collection, interpretation and analysis, based on their local knowledge and cultural translation, which helps FIFO researchers to "negotiate spaces and situations, and solve problems as they arise."[39] They see the term "research associates" as correcting "unidirectional and hierarchical structures that place the [Western] researcher as expert and knowledge producer while obscuring the diversity of roles conducted by field associates," although they do acknowledge that such a re-labelling does not automatically "erase the asymmetric power dynamics that exist during (and after) fieldwork."[40]

How we label research collaborators is important, especially if we want to recognise expertise rather than services rendered. An Afghan colleague told me early on that he never wanted to be called a 'fixer' but rather a 'consultant.' And he was right; for me, he was at once risk consultant, contextual consultant, interpreter of language, culture and meaning, as well as knowledge broker and co-researcher. In fact, we went on to publish together, acknowledging that my understanding of Afghanistan was the result of a collaborative process.

This brings me to the discussion of how best to give recognition and credit to research collaborations. Baaz and Uta argue that the contribution of research brokers qualifies them to "be considered as full-blown 'co-authors' of research without writing a single word."[41] Fertaly and Fluri suggest either to "do away with authorship altogether" or "expand the concept and forms of authorship so that

36 Baaz and Utas 2019.
37 Fertaly and Fluri 2019.
38 Baaz and Utas 2019, 157–58.
39 Fertaly and Fluri 2019, 76.
40 Ibid.
41 Baaz and Utas 2019, 158.

multiple people can be included and their roles specified," ultimately advocating for the latter.[42] This practice of team authorship may not be so unusual, as it already happens outside the social sciences. I have worked on projects with colleagues in the hard sciences where knowledge products are seen as teamwork and everyone in the team becomes an author, not just those who put pen to paper. This could be good practice for mixed North-South research teams. Furthermore, given that so much research on Afghanistan is written in English, even though it is not an official language in the country, English language skills should not be privileged over other contextual expertise to avoid further externalisation of knowledge production. All of this would pave the way for more equitable research collaboration and help redress long-standing imbalances in knowledge production in contexts where Western researchers have historically taken credit for knowledge they could never have produced without the expertise, collaboration and generosity of Southern researchers.

Interestingly, it is Fertaly and Fluri's first suggestion (to do away with authorship) that the local research organisation I worked with in Afghanistan decided to adopt by producing organisation-branded reports rather than engaging in a complicated discussion about authorship, particularly lead authorship. The idea was that this would give equal credit to everyone involved in the research process, from data collection to data interpretation, rather than just the lead author of the written product (usually a FIFO researcher). Why should the 'white kid' get most of the credit for his ability to write in English? I know that this practice was not always easy to swallow for some of the FIFIO researchers we worked with, given the emphasis on (sole) authorship in much of Western academia, especially in the social sciences.[43] Ethically, however, I believe it was the right choice at the time, especially as it also protected Afghan colleagues from the possible risk of being associated with research critical of powerful individuals and groups. In the end, we erred on the side of caution and opted for institutional branding.

However, I did wonder later whether we might have deprived budding Afghan researchers of official recognition by prioritising institutional branding over individual authorship. I also wondered if we were inadvertently encouraging extractive research practices, because of course knowledge co-production is not just an issue between Western and Afghan researchers, but also a matter of how Afghan researchers acknowledge the help and collaboration they receive from their colleagues and, ultimately, the communities they work with. As mentioned earlier, it

42 Fertaly and Fluri 2019, 80.
43 See Ibid.

is all too easy for poor research practices to be passed on and for local researchers to be co-opted by collaborators into imperial forms of knowledge production.

Thus, I agree with Baaz and Utas,[44] as well as Fertaly and Fluri,[45] that we should give credit where credit is due, especially in cultures with strong oral traditions, and opt for co-authorship when we engage in research collaborations. I believe that we would see a lot more co-authored research outputs if we did not insist that research collaborators put pen to paper and acknowledged that knowledge co-production can be oral, which would also honour the oral tradition in Afghanistan and guard against "making literacy superior to orality."[46]

Before concluding this section, I want to comment on researcher bias, because it is discussed in the literature in relation to working with local research collaborators,[47] but was also something that irritated my Afghan colleagues. They complained that their analyses were undervalued because outsiders automatically assumed that they were biased by the unique tribal, ethnic, urban, etc. lenses they brought to the research. Instead, white FIFO researchers were assumed to be (more) objective. This is, of course, absurd. As I showed in unpacking my positionality, all researchers come with baggage, simply different biases. Furthermore, the practice of "tribe-building" by FIFO researchers – described as "a useful way to recognise that without a trusted set of interlocutors to make introductions, share hard-earned wisdom and offer hospitality and protection, researchers cannot navigate the minefields – intellectual and otherwise – of the war zones they wish to study"[48] – comes with the associated lenses, politics and possibly groupthink that 'tribes' can bring.[49] In other words, no matter who we are (Western researcher or local (Afghan) expert), we all need to carefully unpack our positionality and practice reflexivity in the research process to keep our biases in check.

In the end, I always come back to Goethe's Faust and the importance of gaining knowledge in an ethical way, not taking shortcuts out of greed (making a deal with the devil) or extracting knowledge for our own benefit (e.g. career advancement). We need to be honest about the limitations of our knowledge and our biases and recognise the knowledge and expertise that others bring to the research collaboration. I was privileged to have guides who helped me under-

44 Baaz and Utas 2019, 158.
45 Fertaly and Fluri 2019, 76.
46 Jackson 2020, xi.
47 See Themner 2022.
48 Parashar 2019, 251.
49 See Utas 2019; Malejacq and Mukhopadhyay 2016.

stand the local context and research in Afghanistan, close collaborators and colleagues who were willing to teach me about their culture and ways of knowing, and to whom I could ask questions. It would be unethical not to acknowledge the wisdom they have imparted to me.

Signpost 2: Storytelling as a Collaborative Research Practice

In the previous section I already emphasised the importance of recognising oral tradition in Afghan knowledge production. Here I would like to explore this further and its connection to storytelling and how it applies to collaborative research, which has long been recognised as important in Indigenous research.[50]

I began this article with a small story or joke, noting that, in my experience, Afghans often speak through anecdotes and stories. Although I am aware that these stories can mean different things to different people depending on their positionality, I wish I had included them more often in my research and analysis. The following anecdote, told to a colleague by a community elder from Paktia during a research project on Taliban-community relations, opened my eyes to the power of working with stories.

> Once, a shepherd was stopped by a group of Taliban and asked to explain what kind of people the Taliban were. The shepherd replied: "You people are angels." The Taliban then asked what kind of people the government and international military forces were. The shepherd replied that they were also angles. The Taliban then asked who the bad people were. The shepherd replied, "Civilians are the bad people."

I have discussed this story and its interpretation at length with my Afghan colleagues. Although others may interpret it differently, we felt it said so much about how the civilian population in parts of Afghanistan must have felt caught between a rock and a hard place between righteous warring parties who demanded that civilians choose sides. If each warring party sought the moral high ground, and it was the civilians caught in the middle who suffered, perhaps they must be the 'bad guys' by default. The story also conveys the risks that a research participant might feel in making a judgement and therefore choosing an indirect form of communication.

50 See for example Iseke 2013.

This means that we need to listen to the stories that are being told, even if at first they seem to be evading the question. This requires "active listening,"[51] or what First National scholar Jessica Russ-Smith calls the Indigenous practice of "listening to hear."[52] Bradley describes the importance of active listening when working with storytelling in the context of oral tradition:

> Oral and western arts and scientific traditions not only speak from different perspectives; they are passed along in different ways. Oral traditions survive by repeated telling, repeated singings and each narrative contains more than one message. The listener is part of the storytelling process too, and is expected to think about and interpret the messages in the story. A skilled listener will bring different life experiences to the story each time they hear it and will learn different things each time. Oral tradition is like a prism, which becomes richer as we improve our ability to view it from a number of angles of perception. It does not try to spell out everything one needs to know, but rather to make the listener think about experiences in new ways.[53]

Afghan researchers are often much more attuned to working with storytelling and can help interpret the stories that research participants tell. This also shows the importance of debriefing after interviews (making sense through dialogue) and discussing what we have heard, rather than jumping to conclusions, as we all make interpretations based on our positionalities, once again demonstrating the benefits of North-South research collaborations. Integrating storytelling and dialogue into research outputs, however, requires a rethinking and re-imagining of the nature of academic publishing that allows space for stories to be told and debated, which fortunately has already begun.[54]

Signpost 3: Research as Relational and an Exercise in Trust

I have learnt over time and through reflexivity that research is relational and requires the building of trust, again something that Indigenous methodologies have long emphasised. On my first research trip to Afghanistan during the first Taliban Emirate in 2000, I interviewed the late Dr Suhaila Siddiqi, then quite famous as the only female surgeon the Taliban allowed to practice. The interview

51 See also Fujii 2018.
52 Oral presentation at a 2017 UNSW Sydney School of Social Sciences retreat.
53 Bradley 2020, 52.
54 See for example Gitau, Arop and Lenette 2023.

took place in her ministerial office, which was devoid of personal touches. She answered my questions politely, with short and sometimes rather non-committal answers to my questions. I felt that our conversation about women's health in Afghanistan was rather superficial. Towards the end, after perhaps an hour, when I thought the interview was over and was about to leave with my hand on the doorknob, something changed. Dr Siddiqi put her hand on my arm and, as we stood by the door, began to tell me about some of the difficulties she had encountered doing in her work, what she thought was needed to improve women's health under the Taliban, and the messages she wanted me to take back to international donors. I felt that the previous hour had been a mere introduction to the last fifteen or twenty minutes of our conversation. This has happened to me many times afterwards in other interviews, and I wondered why, until I shared it with a friend and colleague, Alessandro Monsutti, an experienced anthropologist and long-time Afghanistan researcher. He explained that the depth of an interview in Afghanistan was a direct reflection of the relationship one had built with the research participant and the communities. After all, Afghanistan was a country in conflict, where trust had become a quite scarce commodity,[55] so building rapport was obviously important. Until a researcher has established rapport (i.e. built a relationship) and established trust, it is rarely possible to scratch more than the surface. Thus Dr Siddiqi had spent the first hour assessing me, deciding if and how much I could be trusted, before revealing more.

I was embarrassed because I felt I should have known this. How presumptuous and arrogant to assume that I would be immediately trusted when I had just arrived, an unknown stranger, a FIFO researcher with no established relationships of trust; after all, information is a form of currency and sharing it with the wrong person can be dangerous. I reflected on how this experience differed from my previous research encounters in Mexico and the countries of the Horn of Africa. Firstly, in both research projects, I was introduced to communities and research participants by a local organisation that had worked with them for a long time, so there were established relationships. Secondly, in the case of Mexico, I spent time with the women at organisational events before interviewing them, and the women talked to each other about their encounters with me. I also had the advantage of being fluent in Spanish, and in the Horn of Africa project I had the advantage of having a co-researcher from Kenya. When I first arrived in Afghanistan, I had no language skills, no deep understanding of the context, and no trusted co-researchers. I developed these later. This shows not only the importance of relationships and trust, but also that these can be built by

55 Monsutti 2013b.

local partners prior to the actual research engagement (i.e. by research brokers or associates), although these efforts and expertise are not always sufficiently recognised by FIFO researchers. In my experience, the best research insights were gained where I – or my Afghan colleagues – were able to build a relationship. This meant conducting interviews over several days or repeated visits, sitting together and drinking tea, building connections around shared interests or experiences that often came from opening up and discussing my positionality.

Fujii agrees that all interviewing is relational, built on trust that is "negotiated between the interviewer and interviewee and [...] shaped by the interests, values, backgrounds, and beliefs that each brings to the exchange."[56] This also means that, "drawing on interpretivist assumptions, relational interviewing produces data that *emerge dynamically through dialogue* between researcher and interviewee"[57] [emphasis mine]. However, Indigenous methodologies caution us to be humble and understand that there may be limits to the relationship we can build as FIFO researchers. Lauren Tynan warns us that "relationality" is "a practice bound with responsibilities with kin and Country"[58] and thus should not be "reaped for academic gain."[59] Otherwise, I think it becomes another form of exploitation.

In order to build relationships with local communities and at the same time give back (reciprocity), the local research organisation I worked with in Afghanistan ended up training members of the communities in the areas where we were conducting research so that they could actively participate in the research process and benefit financially. In other words, we traded technical research skills and the provision of livelihoods through paid employment for local expertise and access through established relationships. However, to my regret, we did not involve these people as much in the analysis process and not at all in the writing process, so we did not fully involve them as co-researchers. Based on my continued reflection and engagement with Indigenous methodologies, I see this as an error that I intend to rectify in the future by ensuring that all local parties are recognised as co-producers of knowledge. As I have noted before, I learn from my own mistakes and failures.

56 Fujii 2017, 3.
57 Ibid.
58 Tynan 2021, 598.
59 Ibid.

Signpost 4: Research as Conversational

In the previous sections I have emphasised the importance of building trust, storytelling and dialogue between researchers. Following on from this, I see research in Afghanistan as emerging from dialogue or a series of conversations that help to build trust and relationships. Thus, my Afghan colleagues and I began to explore informal conversations as a more localised approach to qualitative interviewing, which is of course common in ethnographic research. Although initially driven by the need to manage risk in areas where it was simply too dangerous to use a written research guide, we had tapped into a uniquely Afghan way of doing research, one that valued oral tradition and relationality. At the time, however, I felt that the this adaptation was potentially a weakness – especially when compared to more formal interview methods –until I came across the indigenous methodology of 'yarning' as a form of knowledge production.[60] Bessarab and Ng'andu describe "yarning, as opposed to narrative inquiry, [as] an informal and relaxed discussion; a journey both the researcher and the participant share as they build a relationship and visit topics of interest to the research."[61] They also discuss how they wrote the article in part to explain their more context-sensitive methodology after being challenged by more positivist-oriented researchers.[62]

In its nuances, 'yarning' is very similar to the way Afghans communicate with each other and with outsiders. As a visitor, which is what researchers are, you are invited into a house and treated as a guest, offered tea and sweets. The purpose of a visit – or research – is never discussed at the outset until more general matters have been discussed (e.g. one's own health, the health of the family, experiences of visiting Afghanistan or the region, etc.). Here, I often had to keep my 'Germanisms' in check, such as the desire to get straight to the point after a brief greeting, without exchanging cultural formalities and establishing positionality. Depending on the setting, this relationship building through 'yarning' may take several cups of tea, or repeated visits, certainly more time than we might allow for more formal interviews. Again, active listening skills are important to notice shifts in the conversation and to recognise when enough trust has been established to move to the next level of research dialogue.

I learned a lot through informal and conversational research practices, such as discussing gender equality with Afghan women on equal terms. Once I had established a level playing field with my research participants, treating them

60 See also Geia, Hayes and Usher 2013.
61 Bessarab and Ng'andu 2010, 15.
62 Ibid.

equally as experts in a more global struggle of women with gender norms, I learned much more about the negotiated aspects of gender relations in Afghanistan[63] and where Afghan women felt Western approaches to women's empowerment were missing the mark. Now I find it hard to think of research as anything other than conversational and wish I had long ago abandoned more rigid Western research methods and embraced Afghan ways of doing research.

Signpost 5: Research as Contextual

I have already touched on the importance of understanding context in the previous sections. But it is worth returning to the seminal work of Mary Anderson, who coined the 'Do No Harm' approach,[64] and the importance of understanding context in everything we do, including research; we are always part of the context in which we operate and thus can cause harm. While Anderson's work was aimed at development actors, I found it equally applicable to research practice, particularly in reflecting on how our positionality interacts with the research context to either facilitate or hinder research.[65] This is also emphasised by Fujii, who argues the following about research encounters:

> No matter their duration or quality, they are always rooted in a specific social context, formed in part by "who" the interviewer and interviewee are, both individually and in interaction, the time of day, physical location, and presence or proximity of others. The larger context in which researcher and participant come together is also part of the interaction. [For example], Meeting right before key elections, during a severe drought, or just after financial collapse will also shape the kinds of interactions in which researcher and participant engage.[66]

This means that research means emerging with context rather than treating it as something that can be extracted, which of course takes time. We also need to engage in constant observation to create and maintain contextual awareness, something I have argued elsewhere that participant observation is underused in research.[67] Collaboration with researchers who know the local context is a good

63 See also Kandiyoti 1988.
64 Anderson 1999.
65 See also Bentele 2020.
66 Fujii 2018, 3.
67 Schmeidl 2020.

way of speeding up understanding and contextualising findings, although these are more fruitful when built over time and based on mutual respect.

Concluding Thoughts

As I emphasised at the outset, this chapter has emerged from an ongoing reflective journey in which I have tried to make sense of my research encounters and collaborations in Afghanistan. Although my reflective ruminations are far from complete, I have tried to share how I see part of a uniquely Afghan way of doing research as highly contextual, conversational, relational and ultimately an exercise in trust. I have also touched on the role of storytelling as a collaborative research practice that ultimately culminates in respect for Afghan oral traditions and local (embodied) expertise.

Writing this chapter has led me to look more closely at other literature and to realise that much of my thinking is not necessarily new but can be found in Indigenous research methodologies. Similarly, I have found that other researchers are grappling with similar issues and have been reassured that colleagues in the social sciences are beginning to ask more critical questions and no longer accept the holy grail of positivism that drives extractive research, peddles the myth of the researcher's detachment and, perhaps most importantly, assumes the superiority of Western methodologies.

Research and research collaborations are perhaps best understood as a journey or a work in progress. Drawing again on Mary Anderson's 'Do No Harm' approach,[68] I see research, like any other practice, as a series of ethical choices. Through reflexivity we can make these choices transparent and move towards a more collaborative research practice in which we strengthen – rather than undermine – local expertise, research methodologies and capacities to know and be known. Only then can we achieve a more equitable co-production of knowledge. There is, of course, more to be done, but it is certainly a journey worth pursuing. I would like to acknowledge that I could not have come this far without the encouragement of Andrea Fleschenberg and her involvement in the co²libri project, including this book collaboration, which gives me the opportunity to complete my unfinished business, hopefully through fruitful research collaborations.

68 Anderson 1999.

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