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Access denied

Navigating access during ethnographic fieldwork on police reform in Kenya

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Introduction

I was becoming impatient. After adjusting my proposal twice, exchanging numerous emails, and consulting local researchers over a period of six months, I had not received formal confirmation that I would be allowed to conduct ethnographic fieldwork within the state organisation that was the focus of my research project. Then, finally, in the early hours of 7 March 2018, I received this email:

Morning Prof,

We spoke on your request to conduct research.

As I indicated it is not possible for the Authority to host your study due to the nature of its operations.

We regret and apologize for the delay in communicating this position to you,

Regards.

My heart sank. Devastated and bewildered, I re-read the email, trying to fathom what it conveyed and digest its distressing news. The rest of the day was a blur of emotions. I was left wondering whether my research had any purpose. Writing this now opens this old wound – that sensation of failure and rejection.

This email, and all that it entailed, represented, and conveyed, played a fundamental role in my research on police reform in Kenya. Initially, my objective had been to conduct ethnographic fieldwork within the Independent Policing Oversight Authority (IPOA), a state institution that was established in 2012 to oversee, regulate, and investigate police (mis)conduct. IPOA's origins largely stem from a long (colonial) history of police (mis)conduct, especially the post-election violence (PEV) of 2007–2009, where the police had played an active role in much of the violence committed.[1] This reaffirmed the urgency for substantial police reform and throughout the years that followed, an expansive police reform project had been established, very much through

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the financial backing of international donors and organisations (Hope 2015; Kivoi and Mbae 2013; Skilling 2016). One key component of the reform project was the establishment of more robust oversight institutions and mechanisms, including IPOA (Osse 2016). Globally, IPOA was, and is, seen as a remarkable and progressive organisation and is provided with a broad legal mandate to implement change. By taking its daily operations as the primary research subject, I aimed to understand how attempts to transform the state police were occurring from within the state.

While writing the proposal, access was informally granted by prominent members within the organisation, who signalled that research, especially by a European researcher, would benefit the organisation and, as one of them suggested during an interview in the summer of 2016, 'show to the outside world the leading role that IPOA is playing' and how 'Kenya can serve as an example'. Unfortunately, this opportunity never materialised, and I did not acquire the formal permission that I needed to research IPOA in the ways that I had initially hoped. However, this does not mean that access was never gained. Through other avenues, I was able to gather a substantial amount of data on this organisation and police reform more broadly. Gaining access is thus not solely about acquiring formal permission, but it is a multifaceted and processual trajectory that centres on the various ways in which researchers 'find a "way in" to settings' (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019: 44).

In this chapter, I describe my own access trajectory in order to shed light on some on the realities of fieldwork at large and on researching policing more specifically. In the methodological literature on ethnographic fieldwork, various dimensions, such as ethics, positionality, and representation, are explored, yet the issue of access has been granted far less attention. Furthermore, although the relational nature of access is emphasised (Feldman et al. 2003), access is still often presented as something you have or you do not have, as a momentary event that comprises a 'no' or 'yes' (Kalir et al. 2019). Similarly, the term gatekeeper, that is those research participant(s) that ease or facilitate access, also metaphorically presents access as a 'gate' that is opened and closed.

By exploring my own experiences in Kenya, I aim to underline three crucial dimensions of access in ethnographic research on policing. The first is that research on policing, especially when researching formal institutions, entails 'studying up' (Nader 1974), and this often requires some measure of formal permission, which, as my case shows, is often not granted. IPOA could not 'host my study'; yet there were various other paths I explored to understand the organisation's standing within the police reform project. As I will show in this chapter, rejection and denial, even as blunt as in the form of that email, do not inherently entail the cessation of one's research. Rather, it means that we need to think differently, and very often creatively, about how to find a way in to our research sites and populations. This may mean that immersion and participant observation, which are often seen as two key pillars of ethnographic fieldwork, are impossible, or even undesirable. Access to these groups is a different affair altogether and may need to rely on other research methods. In line with this, the second key issue is that access should not be viewed as a one-off event, but should be seen as a trajectory that is continuously negotiated throughout the research process, even after the data collection period (Bruni 2006; Feldman et al. 2003; Riese 2019). Access is not solely about gaining permission but refers to the continuous ways in which researchers navigate a way in and the mechanisms they employ to do so.

The third, and perhaps most central claim here, concerns analysis: gaining access is a part of the data collection period because 'the experience of gaining and maintaining access can itself tell us a lot about practice, processes, and power' (Cunliffe and Alcadipani 2016: 536). Acquiring access entails the commencement of a relationship between a researcher and the researched and signifies how a specific organisation or group of participants defines itself and relates to others. By centralising issues of access into one's analysis, we can gain further insight into the research subject. In other words, this disappointing email did not only convey something about

my relationship with the organisation, but also about the organisation itself, its relationship to others, and, more broadly, about police reform and state power more broadly.

In order to unpack these three interrelated dimensions, I will first review some of the literature in anthropology and policing about accessing the field. In the section thereafter, I chronologically outline my access trajectory and what this entailed and conveyed about policing and police reform in Kenya. I end this chapter with some remarks that emphasise the importance of including access trajectories centrally within one's analysis.

Accessing the field

In books on qualitative research methods and ethnographic fieldwork, access is often briefly mentioned as a part of designing, setting up, and initiating the research project (Monahan and Fisher 2015). It is commonly portrayed as a logistical and practical matter that necessitates preparation and centres around identifying appropriate research participants and approaching particular research sites or populations. This practical dimension is consolidated by the increasing scrutiny exercised by ethical review boards that demand researchers demonstrate that their proposed projects are both ethical and feasible. Within this hands-on approach, access is often divided into distinct phases, including establishing initial contact, building rapport, and then eventually, 'exiting' the field (Feldman et al. 2003). Scholars speak of various gates of access (Fox and Lundman 1974), and different levels of access, including primary versus secondary access (Brannick and Coghlan 2007), whereby the former entails obtaining permission and the latter refers more to building rapport. Similarly, Chughtai and Myers (2016) make a distinction between access and entrance and highlight the importance of entrance as a complex 'rite of passage' into the field. These different approaches not only highlight how access means different things in different contexts, but also that it should be equated to permission, despite the way in which it seems like a formal procedure. Rather, access is a relational and ongoing mode of engagement that entails a continuous 'process of building relationships' (Feldman et al. 2003: vii). Access is not an event, but a process, or as outlined by Kalir et al. (2019: 6), 'as a wave one had to constantly surf in an effort to stay on board'. The diversity of ways in which this process unfolds is portrayed extensively in *Gaining Access* (Feldman et al. 2003), one of the only edited volumes that provides various accounts of how researchers gained access to a particular site or population.

When flipping through several monographs randomly picked from my bookshelf, I quickly noticed that most authors fleetingly discuss access and do so only as a way of accounting for how the research process started, rather than it acting as a 'crucial piece of the research puzzle' (Bondy 2012: 587). Notably, authors that do elaborate on access can be placed into two broad categories. The first is when particular gatekeepers and key informants play a crucial role in the research project (see Reeves 2010). Phillipe Bourgois (1993), for example, elaborates on the prominent role that Primo and Cesar played in allowing him to spend years with crack dealers and users in Harlem, New York. Similarly, Sudhir Venkatesh (2008) portrays his crucial relationship with gang leader JT in understanding the detailed everyday workings of gangs in Chicago.

The second category is when researchers enter sites or engage with populations that are seen to be risky, guarded, or sensitive (Monahan and Fisher 2015; de Goede et al. 2020; Verdery 2018). These may include dangerous or inaccessible neighbourhoods (Goffman 2015; Wacquant 2004), exclusive research populations (Ortner 2010; Ostrander 1993), illegal or criminalised populations and topics (Ferrell and Hamm 1998; Scheper-Hughes 2004; Siegel and de Wildt 2016), or perhaps, more broadly, those that align to what Laura Nader (1974) has infamously coined as 'studying up'. This latter category includes organisations and state institutions

(Lavanchy 2013; Mathur 2016), such as prisons (Frois 2017; Chih Lin 2003), immigration centres (Bosworth and Kellezi 2016; Kalir et al. 2019), the military (Ben-Ari and Levy 2014), and policing bodies (Bell 2003; Borrelli 2020; Fox and Lundman 1974). In most of these cases, some type of formal permission is compulsory, forcing researchers to navigate complex webs of bureaucracy. As there is a general assumption that access will be complicated and difficult, researchers explain their access trajectories in more detail, almost as if this is needed in order for their findings to be (considered to be) valid. For example, in his evocative ethnography on the French police, Didier Fassin (2013) dedicates an entire introductory chapter to discuss his (or lack of) access to the police, and how this subsequently changed thereafter due to institutional transformations. In addition to showing how access influenced the data he gathered and, subsequently, the kind of knowledge that he produced, he also analyses what this says about the French police, as an organisation. Yet, such chapters are rather rare – most accounts tend to take the form of distinct chapters in methodological books, appendices or prefaces (Cunliffe and Alcadipani 2016), or confessional tales (van Maanen 1988) and thereby act as disconnected texts from the writing itself. A well-known example is William F. Whyte's (1943) appendix in *Street Corner Society*, wherein he describes how he met Doc and gained access to Cornerville, the poor Italian American neighbourhood of Boston.

Furthermore, accounts of *not* gaining access to research sites and populations are even less common, despite Laura Nader's claim that 'anthropologists have had problems of access everywhere they have gone' (1974: 302). In a sense, access is always impartial and fragmented, as much anthropological work has shown. Has anyone ever been given full access to the everyday practices and facets of a particular community? It is, for example, often difficult or even impossible for male researchers to enter female-dominated spaces, and there are certain topics, such as magic and sorcery, that have always been kept secretive, away from the researcher's grasp.

There are, of course, exceptions, such as Geoffrey Ross Owens' (2003) account of how he had been ordered to leave Zanzibar unexpectedly during his second fieldwork period. In order to uncover why, Owens describes his investigatory journey and guides us through a complex web of local politics. Similarly, Michael Schatzberg (1986) also experienced a turbulent process with gaining formal permission to conduct research in Kenya and was eventually forced to leave. Another example is Christian Straube's (2020) recent piece on access denial to Zambia's Copperbelt. Straube portrays how this area has been framed by a recurrent denial of access, and how numerous researchers over the decades have faced this issue, including himself. Unlike others, he does not present this as a practical or methodological dimension but argues that 'fieldwork access should be central within every reflection on the production of anthropological knowledge and the nature of anthropology as a social science' (2020: 401). He portrays how access denial provided him with crucial insights into, for example, the linkages between the local and global dynamics of this particular region that mirrored and reproduced imperial relations. In concurrence with Straube, I contend that we should incorporate our experiences with access more centrally within our analysis, which I do in the following sections.

Access trajectory

My first encounter with IPOA was in April 2015, when I was conducting post-doctoral research on the regulation of the private security industry in Kenya (Diphoorn 2016b). During my scan of the various institutions involved in security regulation, I encountered IPOA and was amazed by its mere existence. I sent an email to the generic contact email address on the website, and, to my surprise, I received a quick reply that Michael, one of the IPOA board members, would be willing to speak to me. We met for coffee at one of the many Java centres, a regular coffee

chain in Kenya's urban centres, and he discussed at length what the remit of the IPOA was. I remember being fascinated, hanging on his every word. I decided there and then that this would be the topic of my new research project. When I asked at that moment whether this would be of interest to them, I was met with enthusiasm, and during several email correspondences over the next few months, this was repeatedly confirmed.

When I mentioned this project to several acquaintances in Kenya, they were surprised about the positive response I had received, further reaffirming the reputation of state institutions as being inaccessible to outsiders. I was, however, a bit more optimistic and not so perplexed about Michael's enthusiasm, perhaps naively so. I attribute this largely to my past research experience on private security companies in South Africa and Kenya. In both cases, I had originally anticipated that accessing these companies would be difficult, and perhaps impossible, yet the contrary was the case. In South Africa, I was able to spend a lot of time with security officers across various companies (see Diphoorn 2016a), and, in Kenya, I had been able to accompany private security officers, often with the police, on various patrols (see Diphoorn 2020). Although I knew that police reform was a more delicate subject and anticipated some potential hiccups, I was also hopeful that access could be possible.

Fast forward to a year later in 2016, when I received the news that funding for my research proposal on this project had been granted. I returned to Nairobi a week later for a brief visit and met with Michael to discuss my plans. His interest remained, and together we outlined how I would commence my research in the following year, when I would return for a longer fieldwork period. My interactions with Michael became jovial, friendly, and inspiring. In addition to being helpful and supportive, we also exchanged personal stories, and he increasingly became a confidante and key interlocutor.

A year later, in August 2017, I returned to Nairobi, this time with my husband and six-month-old son, for one year of fieldwork. It is important to note, and the relevance of this becomes clear later, that we arrived just a week before the presidential elections. Similar to many parts of the world, elections are filled with tension, and, in Kenya, many of these periods are marked by violent outbursts. Before travelling there, several friends warned me not to go just before the elections, cautioning that violent clashes were expected. In addition to safety concerns, I also questioned the impact this could have on my research. Yet, after contemplating the options, we nevertheless went as scheduled and ended up spending the first two weeks predominantly inside the house, watching the elections unfold. As expected, a 'deadly election season' (McConnell 2018) unfolded, and the (excessive) force by the police was a key component of that period.

Amidst this, the first person who I went to see was Michael. For the first time, I was nervous about seeing him, knowing that it carried a lot of weight. The research was now actually going to proceed, and somehow, I feared that something could go wrong. Luckily, our friendly encounter eliminated my concerns. In addition to catching up like old friends, we outlined the best way for me to approach IPOA. He suggested that I write a short report (maximum of three pages), wherein I outline the content of my research, who I am, my methodology, how IPOA would benefit, and, most importantly, how my research would shape our understanding of policing.

In addition, he encouraged me to highlight my friendly relationship with Joseph, a highly respected Kenyan researcher, because he said, 'any connection to him will help you'. I left the meeting confident. When one of the waiters walked by and patted Michael on the back and called him 'IPOA', Michael laughed and explained to me, 'People here like to call me IPOA'. It validated my perception that he was the right person to discuss this with and left me feeling self-assured. Importantly, he told me to wait until after this 'election-business' was over, because now, with the current circumstances, they would not have time to look at my request.

I followed Michael's suggestions and eventually sent a brief proposal to John, the CEO of IPOA, in the first week of September. We quickly established contact, and, within a week, I had a formal meeting with John and Juma, who managed all research activities. I was nervous that morning, realising that this was a decisive moment, yet I was optimistic. As I drove to the offices, I daydreamed about this becoming a part of my daily routine, about how I would have to find the quickest route to come here amid heavy Nairobi traffic. Similarly, when I entered the building, I imagined coming here every day and how this building would symbolically act as my new research home.

After dealing with the usual formalities when entering government buildings, such as identifying myself with my passport, I was met by Anne, who said that she was expecting me and laughed and said: 'Is it just you? I was expecting an entire team!' I was taken aback by this comment, but tried not to let it shake me. After waiting for a while, at exactly 10:30, when our appointment was to take place, I was directed into a boardroom, where Juma was already sitting. I introduced myself to him and was informed by Anne that breakfast was ready. I saw quite an extensive assortment of food on the table. Juma jokingly stated, 'yes, this is IPOA. We look after ourselves!' For the next 10 minutes or so, I chatted with Juma; yet I got the impression that he was unaware of the purpose of my visit, and as time moved on, I felt he was becoming agitated, wanting John to come very soon. At one point, he left the room to ask Anne about John's whereabouts. He kept gesturing me to get something to eat and drink, so I poured myself some rather cold instant coffee, and as I was doing this, John arrived and the meeting commenced.

For the next 45 minutes, we discussed my plans. John started by explaining that IPOA is a unique and young organisation and that everything was a bit precarious at the moment due to the elections. His questions largely focused on my intentions, and they wanted to see a detailed schedule of fieldwork. I tried to explain that as an anthropologist, it is not common to work with a fixed hypothesis and schedule but that we often use an inductive approach and adapt to the way things progress. I thoroughly explained my methodology, most specifically, participant observation, and how I wanted to understand 'how things happen around here'. Yet, this only provoked further questioning. John then suggested me being present for a few hours, and when I responded by mentioning that I would like to be here for a year, John was surprised and said: 'You want to be here for a whole year!?!' When I responded with a 'yes, if that is possible', he simply nodded. I immediately regretted saying this and felt that I had asked too much. Yet, I also observed that he did not say this was *not* possible. I then offered to provide a detailed schedule, which would include initially spending approximately one week in each department. After that period, we would reconvene and discuss together how to move forward. They smiled and concurred with my proposition, both seemingly relaxed and pleased.

In addition, they raised three key issues that were non-negotiable. The first concerned geography: in my proposal, I had focused on Nairobi; yet it was suggested that I also include recently established regional offices in my scheduling, to which I immediately agreed. The second issue concerned my research permit formalities. In Kenya, researchers, both local and foreign, must acquire a research permit to conduct research through the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation. Once this is granted, it is compulsory for foreign researchers to obtain a research pass from the Department of Immigration that allows a researcher to stay in the country for a period of time. John emphasised: 'we have the police on our heels and we cannot afford to make a mistake'. Since they are responsible for monitoring police (mis)conduct, it is essential that they also 'follow the necessary rules and procedures'. He underlined how my research activities would 'stand out' and that one way or another, they needed to make certain that I had formal permission to conduct the research and was not just in the country on a tourist

visa. He repeated this numerous times that 'everything had to be according to the law'. This too, was not a problem, as my research permit had already been approved, and I had recently submitted my request for a research pass. The third issue concerned timing: because of the elections, 'everything is not normal', and my research could only commence once 'this was sorted out'.

We agreed that I would contact them once I had all the formalities arranged. In the meantime, they would draw up a confidentiality agreement to discuss the protection of the collected data. When it seemed like the conversation had ended, John, rather surprisingly, asked if Michael, who was not in the meeting (in writing or in person), would 'vouch' for me and confirm that we worked together. Once all of these details were sorted out, they would organise an introductory meeting with the entire management team. I left the room feeling ecstatic. Although I realised that some logistical issues had to be arranged, it all felt very feasible and I felt no trepidations.

About two weeks later, I met with Michael to discuss my draft schedule. He advised me on certain issues, such as which meetings were useful to attend, and how it might be wise to shuffle between the different departments so that I could follow several cases. Again, I experienced my interaction with Michael as being extremely supportive. In my field notes, I wrote how 'I am so happy to have his support' and wondered 'what I would do without him!'

Within days, all my plans were ready, and, to my surprise, my research pass was approved promptly. Immediately thereafter, in the first week of November, I sent the following email:

Dear John and Juma,

Thank you very much for meeting with me several weeks ago to discuss and consider my request to conduct research with IPOA. As requested, I have waited until the passing of the elections and I have collected the necessary documents before the research can commence.

As discussed, you can find the following documents attached:

1. A proposed research schedule wherein I outline how and when I would like to conduct the research.
2. A copy of my research pass in my passport (approved and provided by Department of Immigration).
3. A copy of my research permit, entailing that approval of my research has been provided by the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation.
4. A letter from Utrecht University, stating that I am an employee at the University and am doing research on their behalf.

Furthermore, as requested, I have cc-ed Michael (current board member) in this email, who has stated his willingness to vouch for my intentions.

I sincerely hope that this is sufficient information. Please do let me know if you require further information.

I look forward to discussing this matter with you in person.

Best regards,

I sent this email with thrill and excitement, ready to start the research. Yet, when I did not hear back from them in the first two weeks, I slowly became agitated, fearing what this meant. My intuition was confirmed when I received the following email on November 23:

Dear Tessa,

I hope you are doing well.

Your request for research on IPOA has been fully considered by the Authority. Unfortunately, I wish to inform you that the request is not tenable due to your preferred research methodology.

My apologies for any inconveniences caused.

Regards,

Immediately after receiving this, I called Michael, in panic, utterly confused. He calmed me down and reassured me that this was a 'minor issue that can be resolved easily'. As he had to rush off to an urgent meeting, he was brief, yet then sent me the following email:

Dear Tessa,

I was informed that your methodology of inserting yourself within IPOA was not tenable. But you were given a life line where if you could conduct FGDs [focus group discussions] using ethnographic methods which are either QUAN or QUAL would be reviewed by the Committee in charge of Research, led by . . . and Secretary is Juma.

I hope your meeting with John opened this area of discussion. Kindly ensure you do that, soonest. And secondly, let's have this brought to the Board Committee soonest.

I felt this was an enormous setback. I had failed to explain what ethnographic methods are, what they entail, and the enormous benefits they provide. Similar to Fassin (2013: 21–22), who explains how the word 'ethnography' triggered a range of undesired associations, Is ensed that this had been a terrible mistake. I blamed myself for revealing this, as I should have known that this would raise alarm bells. As highlighted by Hammersley and Atkinson (2019: 52), compliance with complex bureaucratic systems and rules is not always 'conducive to ethnographic inquiry'.

While questioning my actions, it made me think of Hugh Gusterson's (1997) claim that when one aims to 'study up', we need to recognise that participant observation isn't always possible or desirable. Rather, we should engage in a form of polymorphous engagement, which refers to 'interacting with informants across a number of dispersed sites, not just in local communities, and sometimes in virtual form; and it means collecting data eclectically from a disparate array of sources in many different ways' (116). I recognise in myself (see Diphoorn 2021) Gusterson's claim that many anthropologists have a 'fetishistic obsession with participant observation' (116). I questioned whether I had been so naïve as to assume that participant observation would have even been possible. Yet, I also needed to be pragmatic, and I quickly made concessions. Therefore, and following Michael's advice to make haste, I quickly drafted a new schedule that eliminated anything that may seem to be 'ethnographic' and left it at interviews, focus group discussions, and a survey. I submitted a renewed proposal in the first week of December.

The next email I received is the one that started this chapter dated 7 March 2018. In those three months, I sent several reminders and spoke to various employees on the phone, yet I kept hearing that the formal response to my request was pending. In the meantime, of course, my research had continued in a different direction. Due to the lengthy nature of this process, I had already decided to widen the scope of my research and not solely focus on IPOA. This confirmed the inductive and rather unpredictable nature of ethnographic fieldwork; although we commence research projects with certain questions and objectives, our empirical realities often

steer us in different directions. As highlighted by Bob Simpson (2005) more than a decade ago: 'You Don't Do Fieldwork, Fieldwork Does You'.

By the time I received the formal denial, I had already attended numerous events on police reform and had conducted more than 50 interviews with relevant individuals. In fact, the situation was at times absurd, because in the meantime I had spoken to numerous IPOA employees. For example, I attended several court cases of convicted police officers and chatted with the IPOA investigators about these cases. However, to respect the formal chain of command, I had waited to request formal interviews with them. This had all been in vain. Yet in contrast to Owens (2003), I did not try to counter the IPOA's decision and convince them otherwise. Because as devastating as this formal denial was, it was also a relief. The waiting was over, and I could stop hoping for what had come to feel impossible.

In the summer of 2018, in the last week of my fieldwork period, I met with Michael. Although we had briefly talked about this entire situation, this was actually the first time that we really sat down and discussed what had happened. The topic was prompted by a joke I made, unquestionably a bad one, about who would collect the bill. He initially got rather defensive about the access issue, claiming that it had not been his fault. Fortunately, he slowly relaxed and then rambled a bit, quickly shifting from one factor to the next, stating that several board members felt that IPOA was 'too young for external researchers' and that many questioned how they would benefit. He then admitted that some speculated that he himself was being paid for this and that there was an assumed conflict of interest. This shocked me, yet I tried not to visually react, allowing him to continue. He then stated that it was primarily John's fault, who had handled this poorly. It felt like an endless list of reasons and factors, which I eventually interpreted as either he did not know the reason or did not want to tell me. Or perhaps there was not *one* reason at all, but an amalgamation of several. What was clear was that it still bothered Michael – I could sense he was upset and that he felt he had failed me. I made clear to him that it didn't matter anymore, literally saying, 'let bygones be bygones'. At that point, it really did not matter anymore, while my relationship with Michael did.

Reflections on access

This does not mean that, before that meeting with Michael, I had not thought intensely about why formal permission was not granted and why this had not been conveyed to me much earlier. I still do not have concrete answers but have, of course, speculated and reflected at length together with friends, colleagues, and other research participants. In the following section, I discuss several dimensions that may provide insight into why I was not formally granted permission to conduct the research I requested. In discussing these dimensions, I aim to simultaneously analyse what this means about the subject of my research, namely police reform in Kenya, and how this experience has helped me to better understand policing in Kenya.

Researcher denied

My first set of speculations, rather self-centredly, focus around myself: they had denied *me* access. As highlighted by Bruni: 'when access to an organizational context is being negotiated, the actors are much more interested in the researcher as a person than in the theoretical assumptions of the research' (2006: 145). I repeatedly reflected on all of my encounters with them, questioning whether I had approached them in the wrong way. I contemplated a range of mundane

issues, such as the clothing I had worn, my choice of words, or perhaps even the firmness of my handshake, as a means of uncovering how I had failed in Goffman's notion of 'impression management'.

A key part was my inability to convince them of the benefits of my research project. In her account of researching the world of Hollywood, Sherry Ortner (2010) describes how she was eventually able to gain some degree of access through contacts within the academic world who were connected to the independent movie domain of the industry. She argues that this was made possible due to their similarities, which prompted a degree of 'interest' on their behalf to engage with her. This contrasted with the supra-elite Hollywood individuals who lacked this interest. Perhaps I had simply not succeeded in inspiring 'interest' among the IPOA employees.

In these contemplations, I also thought critically about my role as a foreign researcher. According to several (Kenyan) research participants, this was the main issue: the organisation did not want a European snooping around in their affairs. This factor re-surfaced when I later heard that befriended local researchers, all Kenyan, and under the leadership of a renowned Kenyan institute, had been given access to conduct interviews with IPOA in 2018. Although they too had been denied access for various forms of participant observation, their ability to formally conduct interviews was a painful realisation, and it prompted further thoughts about my foreign identity. This perhaps also explains why Michael had initially encouraged me to underline my relationship with Joseph, the local respected researcher. The reality is that the identity of the researcher as either native or foreign can 'influence access in unpredictable manners' (Kalir et al. 2019: 10). As highlighted by John during our meeting, I would 'stand out', and this would also mean more attention directed towards IPOA itself.

Internal politics

More attention was something that IPOA was not in search of, especially considering the internal change it was undergoing at the time. The first interesting development to note is that John, soon after our interactions, left the organisation, and a new CEO was appointed shortly thereafter. Rumours and allegations of political interference circulated.

Another issue to speculate about is Michael and the crucial role that he had played in this entire ordeal. Although I always valued – and still do – my interactions with Michael, perhaps it had been a mistake to make him my trustful confidante. Perhaps it would have been wiser to formally contact the entire board rather than having him act as my liaison. I had in fact, placed all of my eggs in one basket. Had he perhaps, unknowingly, said or done things to obstruct my access? Although this is possible, I prefer not to dwell on this for too long, in order to keep my relationship with him intact and appreciate the supportive role that he played. Yet, it does underline how we, as researchers, are not, and cannot be, fully aware of the dynamics within institutions and the specific role that individuals play therein, especially at the start of a research project. It forces us to question: what makes a good gatekeeper? Like access, there is not a blueprint model for this (Hammersely and Atkinson 2019), and this is often a question of (a lack of) luck and serendipity.

On top of this, another key issue was the inauguration of the new board in the summer of 2018. At the time I requested to conduct my research, the board members were in their final year. Many of the board members, such as Michael who has a human rights background, came from civil society and were highly motivated and driven to make an impact. In my conversations with employees who had been there since its inception, they described at length how the board had 'built IPOA from the ground'. Since its establishment in 2012, IPOA had set up its entire system, its headquarters in Nairobi, nine regional offices, and had recruited a total of 143 staff members (IPOA report 2018). Employees spoke about this with immense pride.

In addition to wanting to uphold a certain legacy, most employees that I spoke to were particularly adamant about one issue, namely maintaining and preserving the independence of the organisation. This independence primarily entailed a lack of interference from external bodies, including donors, but in particular the ruling political elite. In Kenya, the transformation of the security and justice sector sought to eliminate the police's role as the instrument of control by and for the political elite (Akech 2005; Auerbach 2003; Hills 2007). The creation of IPOA was seen by many as a step in the right direction; yet, the political elite did not always support IPOA's existence, and there had been attempts to minimise their mandate in the past. With the instalment of a new board, many people feared that the government would seize this opportunity to fill the board with what one member of civil society described as, 'malleable people' who are 'very compliant'. The issue of the new board was a topic that was repeatedly discussed during my fieldwork, both among IPOA employees, but perhaps most prominently within civil society.

When IPOA was established, many of its first employees came from the human rights sector and civil society more broadly. IPOA was therefore, despite formally being a state institution, regarded as an ally. Yet, during my fieldwork, this relationship was slowly changing, and there were many concerns among civil society that they were 'losing IPOA'. People described how IPOA was 'retracting' and 'pulling away'. For example, during community dialogues organised by grass roots organisations in neighbourhoods where police-citizen relationships were hostile, IPOA representatives were often absent, and this was painstakingly obvious. Many people, especially human rights defenders working in these neighbourhoods, interpreted this as a lack of engagement and became increasingly critical of IPOA. IPOA's obstinate focus on independence, of not wanting to be seen as partisan, also had repercussions and made the organisation appear unapproachable, disengaged, and lacking transparency. My inability to gain formal permission further affirms their unapproachable identity and their stance on independence; it also suggests that immersion of a foreign researcher was problematic or undesirable for them.

In fact, I later realised that my mere interactions with John and Juma had been a privilege. Various journalists and researchers informed me that they had never been able to interview someone from IPOA. Those who were successful said that they had had to wait for a long time and that the interviews ended up being very superficial, whereby employees often reproduced content that was on their website. In that regard, perhaps my minimal interactions with IPOA had been the only type of access possible, thereby showing the various levels that access can entail. Although I had regarded my formal meeting with John and Juma as the beginning of a relationship, perhaps for them, it was the end of one.

In addition to further showing that fieldwork experiences are often shaped by our own (perhaps unrealistic) expectations, I would also argue that this conveys something about the nature of IPOA as an organisation. In his exploration of gaining access to the Spanish state deportation field, Kalir (2019) discusses how the process provided insight into the arbitrariness and opacity of the state. Without comparing himself to illegal migrants, he argues that his process of gaining access mirrored some of the experiences of those migrants. Similarly, my interactions with IPOA mirrored some of the experiences that others had with IPOA: it was a state institution in a precarious position that focused on consolidating its independence and was therefore considered unapproachable and distant to others. This element, namely the distance between IPOA and citizens more broadly, shapes the nature of police reform in Kenya. Therefore, my own experiences of IPOA's inaccessibility gave me insight into the ways that others, such as human rights organisations, also experience difficulties when accessing IPOA. This in turn has implications for the broader police reform project in Kenya.

Election pressure

In addition to understanding the organisational dynamics of IPOA, it is perhaps even more important to contextualise IPOA and understand their precarious and highly politicised position. As mentioned, my fieldwork commenced at the time of the Presidential elections. Although the voting process went smoothly on August 8th, protests erupted after President Kenyatta was declared the winner. Police officers responded violently to these protests, and 24 fatal police shootings were documented by human rights organisations (Mutahi and Ruteere 2019: 258). Opposition leader, Raila Odinga, and his party petitioned the elections, and the Supreme Court annulled the elections, resulting in repeat elections on October 26th, which were again followed by violent episodes throughout the country (for more details, see Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch 2017; Kenyan National Commission on Human Rights 2017). The violence that spanned these months created a tense environment, and, in retrospect, this unquestionably stagnated the start of my research. In the beginning, the country almost came to a standstill, and, even as things loosened up, it was difficult to establish contact and set up meetings. On the other hand, the role of the police in this process and the (excessive) force used by them underlined the relevance of my topic.

Amid all of this, IPOA's role was deemed more important than ever. As the origin of the institution stemmed from excessive force used by police officers in previous elections, the institution was under pressure to demonstrate the merit of their existence. IPOA's sensitive role was made explicit during my first meeting with John and Juma, who stressed that my research could only commence after the elections. IPOA was under significant pressure during the elections, and this continued afterwards, when they were investigating the numerous cases of police (mis)conduct. Many people looked to IPOA to bring several cases to justice, including the heartbreaking death of Samantha Pendo, a six-month-old baby in Kisumu on August 17th. Such investigations are daunting tasks, largely due to the unsurprisingly problematic and rather antagonistic relationship between IPOA and the National Police Service (NPS) of Kenya. As became clear during my conversations with IPOA employees throughout my research, their hostile relationship with police officers was regularly highlighted as their greatest challenge. They spoke at length about how officers failed to cooperate during investigations, failed to report cases that required IPOA's involvement, ignored their summons, and even covered up cases. IPOA had accused the Inspector General of instructing officers not to grant IPOA employees access to police stations without his permission, and there was even a known case of an IPOA officer being locked up by officers who had been accused of a crime.[2] The problematic relationship between IPOA and the police was also highlighted in the board's end-of-term report of 2018, wherein it states:

> Non-cooperation by the National Police Service has been one of the vastest challenges the Authority has faced. Notwithstanding numerous engagements with the NPS, the Authority has incessantly found itself in difficult circumstances to complete investigation cases due to lack of cooperation by the Service.
>
> *(IPOA 2018: 93)*

This precarious situation and inability to carry out their work clarify why the presence of an external party, especially a foreign researcher, is undesirable, especially one who wanted to immerse themselves in their everyday affairs. The idea of immersion, or of 'inserting yourself', as Michael coined it, was particularly problematic for them and perhaps this does point towards some more general challenges for conducting ethnographic fieldwork on formal organisations

such as the police. The notion of inductive research that is open-ended, adaptable, and unrestricted, acts as a sharp, and perhaps, irreconcilable contrast, to the bureaucratic rules and institutional norms that often define and characterise such institutions.

Access alternatives

Fortunately, as much of the anthropological work on bureaucracy has portrayed (see Herzfeld 1992; Gupta 2012), rules and norms are often more performative and thus amenable, rather than static and enforced. Because eventually, despite never gaining formal permission, I was able to speak to various IPOA employees in different contexts and settings throughout my fieldwork. In retrospect, I sometimes think that these informal conversations, which most often took place outside IPOA offices, were more interesting and perhaps allowed them to speak more freely. Juma is a prime example of this. Initially I suspected that he was the one who had obstructed my access, yet he ultimately shared many of his experiences with me. I encountered him on numerous occasions, and we, interestingly, never spoke of my access denial. Yet, during our encounters, Juma spoke at length about IPOA and disclosed a great deal of his perspectives and experiences.

Furthermore, my failure to gain formal permission to IPOA was overshadowed by the formal approval granted by the NPS of Kenya. At the beginning of April 2018, I submitted a formal request to the Inspector General to interview police officers in Nairobi at their respective police stations. I did this despite being almost certain that my request would be denied. However, to my surprise, I was informed in early May that it had been granted. In addition, a 'signal' was sent to all of the Directors within the NPS, followed by a letter that informed them of my study. In the letter, it stated, 'You are kindly requested to inform your respective County Commanders of the intended study and ask them to accord Dr. Diphoorn necessary assistance during the study'. I was initially sceptical, largely due to my experiences with IPOA. As discussed by Cunliffe and Alcadipani (2016: 538), there are also cases where access is formally granted, but that the research never fully materialises. These trepidations were unfounded, as I was eventually able to conduct numerous interviews with police officers. In fact, whenever I thereafter entered a police station to introduce myself to the officer in charge, there was always a sense of familiarity and expectance. As one of them stated to me, 'Ah, we were expecting you. You are welcome!'

Concluding remarks

In a dream scenario, this is the type of welcome I had hoped to receive from IPOA, yet unfortunately, this was not the case. Because permission was formally denied, I was unable to conduct the research that I had hoped to do, and it played a decisive role in shaping the nature of my research and thereby in setting certain conceptual borders. If I had been able to conduct the research that I initially aspired to do, I would have collected different data, made different analyses, and essentially produced different conceptual contributions to the field of police reform and policing. I can only contemplate about what could have been, but I assume that it would have meant a stronger focus on policing oversight mechanisms and intrastate relations. Yet, simultaneously, by not focusing solely on IPOA, my research ventured into different directions, including an indepth engagement with civil society and my interviews with police officers. It resulted in my research taking a wider approach on police reform and gaining more insight into citizens' expectations of the police, police officers' own understandings of reform, and state–society relations, to name but a few. This twist of events is something

that defines ethnographic fieldwork as an open-ended, serendipitous, and unpredictable affair, whereby, again in the words of Bob Simpson (2005), 'fieldwork does you', rather than the other way around.

Perhaps I should have expected this beforehand, knowing that 'studying up' inherently presents numerous bureaucratic hurdles. With the case of IPOA, it became clear that my research, especially the immersive dimension, was problematic for numerous reasons. In addition to organisational and contextual factors, a key observation is that IPOA, despite distinguishing itself from the police, also operates as a rather secretive institution and distances itself from outsiders. My inability to fully access and comprehend how the institution operates has given me insight into the experiences of many Kenyan citizens who also encounter difficulties in accessing IPOA. My experiences thus show that access, whether formal or informal, is an imperative part of our fieldwork experiences, and it is for this reason that we should treat our access trajectories as integral parts of our research projects. Whether a question of luck (Kalir 2019) or not, an analysis of how and why we do, or do not have the ability to speak to certain people and attend certain events, is a key component of the data we collect and, in turn, the knowledge we produce.

Notes

1 This surfaced through the Commission of Inquiry into the Post-Election Violence (CIPEV), also known as the Waki Commission. Of the 1,133 people that had died, 405 were the result of police actions. Police officers and other security agents were also found culpable of other crimes, such as sexual violence. The Waki report can be accessed here: www.nation.co.ke/blob/view/-/482958/data/46262/-/attnbm/-/CIPEV+Report.pdf.

2 See: www.the-star.co.ke/news/big-read/2017-02-14-who-will-guard-the-cops-if-ipoa-cant-access-privileged-information/, accessed 15 May 2021.

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