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Refugees, asylum seekers and anthropologists: the taboo on giving

Ellen Lammers

Guest Researcher
Amsterdam Institute for Metropolitan and
International Development Studies (AMIDSt)
University of Amsterdam
The Netherlands

e.g.lammers@uva.nl

Global Commission on International Migration
1, Rue Richard Wagner
CH:1202 Geneva
Switzerland

Phone: +41:22:748:48:50
E:mail: info@gcim.org
Web: http://www.gcim.org

Global Commission on International Migration

In his report on the 'Strengthening of the United Nations - an agenda for further change', UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan identified migration as a priority issue for the international community.

Wishing to provide the framework for the formulation of a coherent, comprehensive and global response to migration issues, and acting on the encouragement of the UN Secretary-General, Sweden and Switzerland, together with the governments of Brazil, Morocco, and the Philippines, decided to establish a Global Commission on International Migration (GCIM). Many additional countries subsequently supported this initiative and an open-ended Core Group of Governments established itself to support and follow the work of the Commission.

The Global Commission on International Migration was launched by the United Nations Secretary-General and a number of governments on December 9, 2003 in Geneva. It is comprised of 19 Commissioners.

The mandate of the Commission is to place the issue of international migration on the global policy agenda, to analyze gaps in current approaches to migration, to examine the inter-linkages between migration and other global issues, and to present appropriate recommendations to the Secretary-General and other stakeholders.

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Introduction

For nearly three years I lived in Uganda, where I conducted research among young men who fled war, insecurity and the absence of future perspectives in Sudan, D.R. Congo, Ethiopia and Eritrea, and who have ended up in the capital city Kampala. All through this project, and also now while writing up, I have found myself tussling with ethical issues, often closely linked to wider epistemological questions. Many of these sprang from the specific content and context of my research, especially the fact that, because these young people refuse to live in the refugee settlements that the Government of Uganda, in close cooperation with the UNHCR, has designated for them in far-out rural areas, they reside in Kampala illegally and are not entitled to any form of humanitarian assistance. The ethical and epistemological dilemmas I encountered receive ample attention throughout my PhD thesis. For this article I have chosen to focus on one of these, that is, the issue of 'giving'.

It has been a curious thing for me to discover the silent taboo that in anthropological circles surrounds the issue of giving financial/material assistance to the people involved in one's research. Mentioning that one has given money or paid school fees for one or more of one's 'research subjects' is a safe bet for eliciting either highly alarmed or dismissive responses. It is my guess that the subject proves such a hot potato, not only because of methodological concerns, but also because of the complex mesh of preoccupations and sensibilities about power, and guilt, that it represents. Is it because we (read: white anthropologists from the west) are scared of abusing our assumed powers, that the unwritten yet near-sacred rule has arisen: no assistance, no giving, no playing Father Christmas?

Once in Uganda I soon had a problem with the implications of this categorically stated dictum, and I suspect I am not alone in that. Because the question of 'giving' is an inescapable dilemma of contemporary anthropological practice, it would be good to open up this discussion. Let me start by quoting from my research diary. It is my second month in Uganda and I am visiting a Congolese community – refugees from the 1960s – in Katwe, one of the slum areas of Kampala.

> About ten elderly men and three younger women have gathered, being called from their nearby houses by Wilfred [translator]. They come and greet me, we exchange a series of hello's, welcome's and thank you's, and then they sit down on the trunks of the big tree that shades the central part of the compound. They don't talk to each other, watch me closely. I feel weird in my big chair. […] When one man shows me his documents, all of them take theirs from their pockets. It sends a funny feeling down my stomach to see them waiting, silently, holding these scrubby pieces of paper, seemingly their most precious possessions, while in actual fact these have thus far taken them nowhere. […] One man, Roger B., touches a chord in me more than the others. It starts with Wilfred, taking on the hopeful expression I imagine was Roger's, informing me that "he told me yesterday that now this was his chance, because he didn't speak to Hannah last time". And I can only think that his talking to me is not going to bring any change for him. […] After a couple of hours I feel full with all their accounts and histories and the energy flowing between us. Wilfred suggests I tell those still waiting to come back some other time, but I could never do that. So we continue. First I ask to use the toilet. Small consternation ensues, they are obviously not too proud of their facilities.

> When I return my chair and the bench have been moved with the shade. I remember the biscuits in my bag and ask Wilfred whether I should offer them. The full five hours I spend there we don't eat or drink anything. Their enthusiasm in sharing the Orange Crunches hardly makes me feel less stupid about this 'present'. I'm reminded of the scene in Life of Brian where the ex-leper sneers, 'Ten pence, is that all I get for telling my bloody lifestory?!'.

I set off for Kampala with the notion that giving assistance to my prospective research subjects would be 'not done'. I cannot remember if anyone had told me so explicitly, I probably just 'knew' this was the rule, engraved in the anthropologists' collective subconscious. I also knew the official reason for it: giving assistance or rendering services to the 'research subjects' – through the methodological problem known as reactivity – will distort the research process, generate biased information and thus compromise one's findings.

Now my question is: did anyone ever prove the opposite, that is, that people give 'neutral' answers - or even, speak 'the truth' - because there is no assistance involved? I believe this to be an unchallenged, taken-for-granted assumption. It is not difficult to come up with reasons why a person would purposefully give biased answers when there is no compensation involved - in whatever form - for knowledge, trust and time spent and shared.

In refugee situations – and in camps particularly - where researchers and consultancy missions tend to come and go, disappointment and frustration with the empty promises of these visitors is common, and more than once I heard the comment, 'We have seen so many of them, it makes no difference, we tell them what they want to hear'. I believe that before drawing any conclusions about the supposed relationship between assistance and bias, one should look a little deeper into the question at stake, that is, what are people's grounds and conditions for honest and open interaction and communication? I will return to this question below.

There is a second reason for the rule of 'no assistance'. Jacobsen & Landau write,

> "While reactivity problems occur in all field research, when informants are like refugees – marginalized, poor and powerless – the methodological problems fade into ethical ones" (2003: 102).

'Power' and 'ethics' are the keywords that sum up the reasoning: it is un-ethical to give in a context defined by power differences, because giving further exacerbates these differences, and, for one thing, may lure people into participating in a research project that they may otherwise have preferred to stay away from. Again, I believe quick and easy statements like this won't do. Certainly, it is impossible to miss the inequalities that pervade many an anthropologist's research field.

In Uganda, this inequality is most aptly summarised with the word 'security'. The position from which I as a foreigner operated (visa in hand, research approved by UNCST[1], comfortable home, free to leave whenever I should wish to) could not have been in starker contrast with the situation of many of the refugees who, in addition to a constant stress about food and shelter, did not have even a simple ID to prove who they were and thus lacked the minimum condition for being secure. Every single day in Kampala reflected the disturbing

[1] UNCST: Uganda National Council for Science and Technology

presence of the injustices of the late 20th century. Still this reality does not allow for statements about power to be superficially made.

Unravelling preoccupations with power

'Power' is a much-discussed concept in social science. Yet I found that when it concerns the practice of research, a rather monolithic notion of power continues to serve as a basis for discussion. I will touch on some of my thoughts intended to begin unravel this notion. It is testimony to the complexity of the subject that some of these thoughts may be in mutual contradiction.

Traditionally anthropologists have gone out to study societies where, in the material sense of the word, the people they encounter are *grosso modo* less well off than they are themselves[2]. It took a while, but in the late 1960s anthropologists began to reflect on the implications of this situation for the relationship between researcher and researched, with 'power' as the keyword. Anthropologists from the west unilaterally considered themselves 'powerful' vis-à-vis the people they studied. And this being powerful, they reasoned, entailed a responsibility in their scholarly work: to 'make heard' the voices of those who lacked power, the people who were silenced.

Soon, however, postcolonial scholars responded by characterising a lot of, also feminist, work as reflecting the arrogance of white scholars: 'giving a voice' to 'Third World' citizens in fact meant appropriating these people's voices for their own (scholarly) purposes. Feminist researchers re-examined their emancipatory projects and concluded that 'making heard the voices of the marginalized' or 'seeing from below' were indeed no self-evident or easy strategies[3]. Moreover, the research subjects, it was 'discovered', have 'a voice of their own'. The focus of the power discourse by self-aware anthropologists then shifted, it seems to me, from an emphasis on do's to an emphasis on don'ts: from the responsibility to use one's power to admonitions about not to abuse it, that is, to not violate the dignity (read: authenticity?) of these 'new' voices.

These admonitions make it sound as if 'they' are passive victims who allow themselves to be played around with, and 'we' have all negotiation power on our side. I do not believe this to be so. Ultimately, people decide what to tell, how to tell it and what to hide or be quiet about. I ally with Nencel who, reflecting on her research among prostitutes in Lima, writes, "A good anthropologist always tries to protect the group participating in her project… However, because the research group is envisioned as vulnerable, it is often assumed they find it difficult to protect themselves, overlooking the fact that most vulnerable people are continuously protecting themselves and usually more experienced in this area than the anthropologist" (2001: 112). And she concludes,

> "Why does the projection of power relations in the field reflect a nearly binary opposition between the powerful and the powerless instead of as in other areas departing from a notion of difference and the multipositioned subject?"

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[2] For some time now this has been changing, with anthropologists working closer to home both in the South and in Europe.

[3] For this postcolonial critique see Said 1989, Spivak 1988, and Trinh Min-ha 1989. For this feminist self-examination see, among others, Schrijvers 1995 and Grant 1993.

Power is not a zero-sum commodity and it is the confusing swinging – in my perceptions and in actuality - between feeling/being powerful and powerless that I struggle with.

I lived in Kampala but never quite got to terms with its reality: I lived with my partner in a comfortable house with huge garden; we paid 'workers' to wash our clothes, guard the gate and prepare our meals. The young men of my study were on their own, no house, no regular meals. I felt ashamed. And when people visited me at home I was particularly glad that I could truthfully say that the house and everything in it belonged not to me but to my partner. At the same time, and with hindsight, I dare say that the difference in living circumstances may have been more shocking and unsettling for me than for them. I am not saying 'they don't care'; I am suggesting they were experienced, in fact double dyed, with this reality, whereas to me the constant, in-my-face confrontation with inequality and injustice was a deeply disturbing novelty.

Relating this to the issue of giving: if we, anthropologists from the west, think we'd better not give because it will unnecessarily underline the differences in power and emphasise the disparity between us (the have's) and them (the have not's), to me this argument has no substance: everybody knows, it does not even qualify for a 'public secret'. In other words: am I trying to cover up because I cannot stand to see reality in all its barefaced truth? Are 'they' concerned about my supposed powerfulness, or am I?

Having grown up in the Netherlands also played its part: I wanted 'equal relations' all the time and with everybody, and tried to brush aside every suggestion of me being different, or worse still, being the expert. I now realise this attitude/behaviour made some people feel uncomfortable. Besides, part of my problem with being approached as 'the expert' or 'the powerful one', was that I felt I had to, and wished to, live up to those expectations. Instead it confronted me with my limitations.

For instance, with my white skin I got people past the gate and into the UNHCR[4] premises, and if lucky to an actual desk, but how much did that really help? However much I wished I did, I had no access to their files, could barely influence their status procedures or resettlement applications. It was not mere modesty that made me not want to be approached as the expert – there is a more selfish reason too: I cannot bear to be confronted with my own powerlessness in the face of so much suffering.

Yet the assumption is that I – white educated woman from Amsterdam - am powerful, not powerless. Because of this assumption, I think, we at times tend to blow up the notion of not wanting to be irresponsible, not wanting to abuse the power and privileges bestowed on us. We make a lot of our potential influence, or even our possible exploitation. However, to begin with, as for the actual fieldwork, the way we go about it will hardly make a difference of life and death to the people we study. To us anthropologists it may be that one big experience potentially changing our lives; to most people we meet we are merely another passer-by, judged in terms of 'is she helpful, does she stick to her promises, does she make an effort to understand?'

A similar argument goes for our writing, which has also become surrounded by sensitivities about power. While many scholars have accepted the fact that anthropology is personal and

[4] UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

subjective, and that this subjectivity is reflected in their representations, uneasiness about the anthropologist's actual presence in the text remains. In my opinion, if we take seriously the condition of positionality, it does no longer require apologies that my text is my text, that it has my words and interpretations. It is simply not realistic to think that I write precisely from 'their' perspective, neither do I need to look for a solution to the fact that I write. I choose to write my thesis for what I believe are genuine reasons. Guilt (about one's presence, one's power) does not serve as a good guide – and in the end will paradoxically often result in a focus on oneself.

Lastly, could it be that, deep down, our preoccupation with power relations is an outgrowth of the fact that we – anthropologists, and people in the west generally - can still only see 'them' in those terms: as powerless? There appears to be a conceptual difficulty: to not equate the fact that people's rights are being violated and their living conditions appalling with the perception of these people as helpless. It is as if the processes and structures that cause inequality, insecurity or poverty in a oddly slippery way become translated into a collective personality problem: powerlessness. Ironically I notice this even in otherwise critical writing.

For instance, reading Wolf's *Feminist dilemmas in fieldwork* (1996), I scribbled in the margins: 'The way she talks about 'unequal power relations' it sounds as if 'our' research subjects are in all aspects of person less worthy'. And: '"Unempowered women": who and what are they?!'. The wrongdoer, I think, is that words like 'poor', 'marginalized' and 'unempowered' are used as if their meaning is self-evident. However, power - or powerful/powerless - cannot be spoken about meaningfully without exact qualifications. If not, we end up with reductionist 'total images', and the persons written about are caused to lose the quality of being human beings.

Refugees are especially hit hard by this discourse of powerlessness[5]. To be clear, no individual is powerful or powerless full stop, and besides, power springs from many sources: power that comes with wealth or status, physical power, the power of personality, intellectual power, the power (or ability) to have rewarding relationships with others, to love and be loved, the powers of creativity. In discussions concerning fieldwork relationships it is usually only the power of material wealth that is taken into account.

Back to giving

Let me return to the core subject of this paper, the issue of giving, or providing material/financial support to one's research subjects. My afternoon in Katwe was an early encounter with the destitute situation in which the majority of people included in my research found themselves. Many more followed and I soon decided to stick to two minimal principles: I would give people money for transport, and if possible combine our meetings and conversations with having a meal. I do not expect anyone will take issue with this.

After a couple of months, I began to take part in the advocacy activities that the Refugee Rights Research Project at Makerere University conducted in the absence of specialised legal services for refugees (e.g. providing copies of written cases to the Government and UNHCR, attending court sessions, accompanying people to their appointments at UNHCR or the

[5] This has not always been the case. See Harrell-Bond 1999 'when refugees were still *people*'.

African Centre for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Victims of Torture (ACVT), ensuring legal guardianship for an unaccompanied Somali girl, writing referral letters to doctors, etc.) [6].

This engagement in hands-on advocacy work taught me a great deal, about the strengths and potential flaws of politically engaged research, and about the subject of my academic inquiries. For example, lining up at one or another office, or the endless missions to try and see a protection officer, fed my understanding of the despair, anger, humiliation, and resistance that are born out of the interaction between refugees and these organisations and - of particular interest for my research project - how this interaction affects (re)negotiations of identity. Anthropologists taking on advocacy work during research continue to set off waves of criticism on the part of scholars who consider this in total contradiction with principles of neutrality and the scientific ideal of objectivity[7]. I feel fortunate to have been nurtured in an academic environment where the limitations to objectivity have long been acknowledged and where neutrality is considered neither obligatory nor desirable.

In addition to the advocacy work, I found myself providing for a variety of things: money for passport size pictures (constantly needed in the asylum bureaucracy), paying for people's letters of recommendation, appeal, request and complaint to be typed and posted, money for photocopying and email services, money for blood checks, medicine, and hospital charges for acute malaria and miscarriage, money for a month's rent or a few nights in a secure hostel, money for food, for a blanket or stove, for paint and canvas, money for transport to refugee settlements.

While this type of giving assistance may already raise a few people's eyebrows, I discovered the matter becomes particularly contentious when I mention that eventually I started supporting quite a few people (i.e. 'research subjects') with school fees, and that some of the young people supported through the Ijayo Foundation I set up when back in the Netherlands, are among the protagonists of my research.

The why's and how's of giving

It did not take very long for me to feel that it was impossible as well as 'not done' to stick to the anthropological rule of 'no giving'. I believe this is, first of all, a matter of ethics: is there ever a valid reason to say no when requests for material, financial or legal assistance come from people in life-threatening circumstances? Though this question requires and invites all sorts of qualifications, my principle answer remains negative. What I encounter 'in the field' is a micro illustration of that enormous macro problem: the unacceptable existence of inequality in the world in which we live.

One may easily be overwhelmed and just leave it at that, simply because there are no ready-made answers and very little one can contribute. Moreover, some people argue they do not believe in charity. I support the opinion that situations of injustice require "a 'rights-based humanitarianism' that goes beyond 'private charity or governmental largess' [and that] this approach is 'not about discretionary asisstance when the mood for benevolence takes us… it is about defending, advocating and securing enjoyment of human rights'" (Birch, quoted in

[6] This project fell under the EU-funded research on policy issues in refugee health care in Sub-Saharan Africa, with Barbara Harrell-Bond as principal investigator.
[7] Exemplary is the heated discussion, in response to Scheper-Hughes' call for a 'militant anthropology', documented in *Current Anthropology* (1995).

Harrell-Bond 2002: 51). However, does this outrule charity? Even if charity would not help someone in the long-term, is that a reason to not give at all? I cannot do justice to this complex discussion in the scope of this paper, yet believe it merits discussion among anthropologists who, by virtue of their profession, travel the world.

As mentioned above, the assistance issue is usually framed in terms of its relevance to the research process and its outcome: giving distorts this process and results in biased (untruthful) information. Anthropologists hope to find or create a context in which people feel free to talk, to share their knowledge, opinions and perceptions. What makes for such a context? Its primary condition is an adequate level of trust, which I think goes hand-in-hand with respect for the other person and his or her dignity. It is context-dependent how trust and respect are obtained and expressed, but it usually has something to do with dynamics of giving and receiving. It may be: being an attentive listener, disclosing intimacies about one's own life, assisting a person to take her child to hospital, or to school, or simply sharing a meal. As researchers, because we enter into relationships with others, we cannot avoid these dynamics. My experience in Kampala taught me very clearly that trust was indeed a precondition for open conversation, and that trust was only generated when I was prepared to enter into a personal relationship that involved sharing and giving. I remember one young man who had fled from Ethiopia in passing referred to another researcher, saying, 'He has never given me anything, he has never shown me he cares, so why shall I trust him?' I fully acknowledge, and I believe this young man did too, that 'giving' can consist of being genuinely attentive and making time to listen to someone in dire circumstances, or, in the case of my research, people traumatised by the experiences of war and flight.

However, depending on one's length of stay and the consequent depth of relationships, one will in some way or other become part of the economy of reciprocity. Ken Wilson (1992) argues that fieldworkers in Africa must realise that they cannot be social members of a community without some sort of economic engagement. Being prepared to give or contribute not only is a matter of ethics, but also is in keeping with the prevalent social rules. Without wanting to paint a naive rosy picture, my experience is that whatever little I gave to people was distributed, often I saw it happening, notes or coins discretely changing hands.

I believe that, though it may be easier to keep one's distance and hide behind 'I'm an anthropologist, I'm here to observe and take notes', this is no guarantee for more truthful information, let alone for a better understanding. Instead, being prepared to give when this is needed will most likely contribute to the level of trust and as such positively contribute to the research process.

I am the first to acknowledge that there are numerous difficulties contained in this issue. Firstly, considering the persective of the person who gives, once you cross that treshold, many challenging questions follow. I found myself confronted with questions like: shall I make time to write to UNHCR on this man's behalf, or should I accompany him on an afternoon waiting expedition to see a protection officer, or do I tell him to look for someone else this time? And since being back in Amsterdam: another email, what shall I reply, do I want to reply? Do I go to Western Union today or do I have other priorities and shall I go tomorrow, or next week?

It never ceases to feel uncomfortable that I can actually make these choices, and that they will always be, to some extent, arbitrary. Most confusing is that the choices I make concern people of my age, whose histories and troubles I know, and some of whom I have come to

know quite intimately. In August 2000, together with Petna Ndaliko Katondolo, an artist from D.R. Congo, I set up Yolé!Africa, an art centre for young exiles and Ugandans. Then I realised how pleased I was with the change of character of my activities: from 'for' and 'on behalf of' it became 'with'; from rather negatively and hopelessly fighting a losing battle with bureaucracy (though necessary and instructive), it became taking part in something I believed in and sharing this vision with others[8]. This said, the fact that a more one-way way of giving at times is genuinely unsettling, does not prove that giving in itself is wrong.

Secondly, I realise that conforming to a community's social or ethical rules, automatically implies taking on a specific role, which in turn determines specific ways of interaction. Paying for someone's school fees may confer the title of 'mother' or 'father' – something, in my experience, many anthropologists are rather allergic to. Yet we already have a specific place and role, we do not arrive, even less so leave, as blank individuals. Interesting is Wilson's point that while giving things in most African societies establishes relations of status, this becomes a problem only "when the researcher, unlike members of the local population, has little experience in making something positive out of a patron-client relationship, and clings to an ideological ideal of equality" (1992).

Thirdly, the most complex issue of this discussion, I believe, does not concern the act of giving. I remember I was talking with someone about our disappointment with much of development cooperation and the many controversies that loom so large in the act of going somewhere with the idea of 'fixing' other people's problems. The person then said she had come to realise it is near impossible to enter into, and especially maintain, an equal friendship with people one meets 'over there'.

I was on the alert, sensitive to her implicitly writing off the feelings of friendship for certain people in Kampala that I treasure so dearly. She then added, 'It is not because giving is difficult, in fact it is easy to give. What is truly difficult is to be the one who must receive.' It struck home to me in Kampala more clearly than it had ever before that indeed it is a hundred times easier to give than to receive. One mere paragraph in my field notes illustrates. Michèl, aspiring artist, is eighteen and fled from Eastern Congo. He is one of my 'research subjects' with whom I developed a personal relationship.

> When we finally get to Kibuli, Michèl wants to rest and lies down on the bed in the garage [which he uses as his temporary atelier], his paintings by his side. I leave him for a bit. Then prepare lunch. He's still quiet. He says it's not good to be a parasite. He feels he's a parasite in everything. 'It's fine to be parasite to your parents, because you know they are your parents and one day when you grow old you will be their host. But with other people it makes you feel bad.'

Marcel Mauss in his seminal *Essai sur le don*, translated as *The gift*, puts it categorically:

> "The gift not yet repaid debases the man who accepted it" (1970 [1950]: 63).

In other words, operating exclusively on the receiving end makes it near impossible to feel a human being among others. The philosopher Simone Weil writes, "Initiative and

[8] For more information on this ongoing project, see www.yoleafrica.com, and www.stichting-ijayo.nl.

responsibility, to feel one is useful and even indispensable, are vital needs of the human soul" (2002 [1949]: 15). Besides, thinking of the young people I met in Kampala, I realise that the issue of giving/receiving not only pertains to their feelings of dignity, but also has relevance in terms of sheer survival: having nothing to give – whether money, food, skills, knowledge – means being in an extremely precarious situation. Without wanting to draw untenable parallels, I believe Primo Levi's insight is relevant here:

> "One of the most important things I had learned in Auschwitz was that one must avoid being a nobody. All roads are closed to a person who appears useless, all are open to a person who has a function, even the most fatuous" (2002 [1963]: 235).

If receiving is so challenging, then what will benefit from critical reflection is the issue of how to give. Difficulties of being on the receiving end are often aggravated by the attitude of the supposed 'helpers'. Everyone can faultlessly sense the attitude of his or her 'helper', and both extremes - 'you are undeserving' and 'you poor thing' - are equally disturbing. Harrell-Bond explores this issue in her article, *The experience of refugees as recipients of aid* (1999), and asks: is it possible that the way refugees are 'helped' (including the role they are forced to assume to get assistance) is one source of debilitating stress for those who are in a position where they have no alternative but to receive? Of course, all human beings are dependent on others to a greater or lesser extent and thus the issue is not being 'helped' *per se*, but the relative powerlessness of the recipient vis-à-vis the helper. Required is a responsible, carefully weighed way of giving, one ingredient of which, I think, is to remember what was pointed about above, that is, that there are multiple sources and manifestations of power and powerfulness.

In conclusion I wish to stress that I realise this subject of 'giving' is a huge one, invoking ethical, methodological as well as philosophical questions. I did not write about it because I think I am near to solving them, but instead because I have struggled with these issues, and continue to do so. In Kampala, I followed my intuition, tried to think critically, observe closely, and welcome advice that people volunteered. Back within the walls of academia, I strongly feel this is a subject that merits anthropologists' open and honest reflection.