

# The Promise of Interpretive Methods in Tightly Controlled Political Settings

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## Abstract

In the summer of 2010, I embarked on a project to examine ordinary Rwandans' responses to the various institutions that the country's government and the international community had put in place to promote justice and reconciliation in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide. Until then, a number of studies on the subject had focused on the community-level gacaca courts while a handful of others had considered the role of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda in holding the masterminds of the genocide accountable for their crimes. Yet, relatively little work had compared Rwandans' opinions of these two institutions. My initial research sought to fill this gap. After arriving in the country, however, I quickly realized that several questions that I had hoped to ask respondents could not be posed within the context of the tightly controlled post-conflict Rwandan regime. Consequently, I had to alter my original research design and reconsider the topics that I could feasibly and *ethically* study. These adjustments involved embracing an interpretive approach to carrying out research: I eliminated certain questions from my questionnaire and became comfortable with the idea of letting interviewees take the lead in framing their conversations with me. This case study highlights the strengths of interpretive methods of research in tightly controlled political settings. It proposes that flexibility and a willingness to revise and reconsider conceptual claims in light of field realities can not only help to strengthen one's insights about outcomes of interest but can also aid in developing trustworthy relationships with interlocutors.

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## Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to

- Recognize the challenges of conducting field research in tightly controlled political settings
  - Understand the hallmarks of an interpretive approach to social science research
  - Distinguish interpretive and positivist methodologies
  - Assess the pros and cons of an interpretive approach to social science research
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## Project Overview and Context

After spending the first year of graduate school delving into the literature on post-conflict reconstruction and the challenges involved in rebuilding societies in the aftermath of war, I found myself becoming particularly interested in the case of Rwanda, which suffered one of the most rapid instances of mass violence during its 1994 genocide (Straus, 2006). Since the end of the conflict in July 1994, the country had embarked on an ambitious and multipronged approach to promote justice and reconciliation. First, United Nations Security Council Resolution 955 had resulted in the creation of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) in Arusha, Tanzania, which was tasked with prosecuting those "most responsible" for the violence. Second,

given the widespread participation of ordinary Rwandans in the genocide, the government had modified a traditional dispute-resolution institution known as *gacaca* to try an estimated 120,000 individuals—who were languishing in overcrowded prisons—for their roles in the violence (Clark, 2010; Schabas, 2002).

My extensive reading of this research had helped me to unearth several important findings as well as identify notable gaps in the literature. First, I found that while there were well-developed bodies of scholarship on the *gacaca* courts (Chakravarty, 2016; Clark, 2010; Rettig, 2008; Thomson, 2011) as well as on the ICTR (Jallow, 2009; Kaufman, 2009), there was a dearth of studies that compared Rwandans' perceptions of these two institutions. Second, much of the extant literature on Rwandans' experiences with *gacaca* had been produced either prior to the implementation of the tribunals (Daly, 2002; Sarkin, 2001) or during their main phase of operation from early 2005 to mid-2010 (Chakravarty, 2016; Clark, 2010; Ingelaere, 2008, 2009; Rettig, 2008; Thomson, 2013; Waldorf, 2010). Third and finally, the literature on *gacaca* had come to be defined by a hegemonic negative stance on the courts, which had criticized the tribunals on various fronts, including state capture (Thomson, 2011), inadequate training of judges (Chakravarty, 2006; Combs, 2007), violating international standards of fairness and due process (Amnesty International, 2002a, 2002b), and retraumatizing participants (Brounéus, 2008). Interestingly, but perhaps unsurprisingly, these works stood in stark contrast to official reports published from within Rwanda (Republic of Rwanda, 2009, 2010; Rutayisire, 2012), which lauded the *gacaca* tribunals for taking on and effectively confronting the monumental challenges of post-conflict reconstruction.

Having identified the above findings and lacunae, I decided that a research project that sought to uncover ordinary Rwandans' opinions about the *gacaca* tribunals versus the ICTR stood to make an original contribution to the extant literature on the country's post-conflict transition. I thus began to devise a research plan to conduct fieldwork in Rwanda during the summer of 2010. Insofar as my fieldwork was due to be carried out during the final phase of the *gacaca* trials, I felt that this study could provide an important summative account of Rwandans' experiences with the community-level tribunals.

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## Research Design

Armed with these research goals, it was in the spring of 2010 that I began to make concrete plans for fieldwork in Rwanda. I approached the proposed research through a positivist lens, which began with concept development and operationalization focusing in particular on justice and reconciliation, hypothesis generation, and plans for data collection and subsequent data analysis. With regard to data collection, I devised two questionnaires, which were comprised of open-ended and non-leading questions. I planned to administer the first questionnaire to ordinary Rwandans who had participated in and/or witnessed *gacaca* or ICTR trials. The second questionnaire was designed for interviews with academic and policy experts as well as government officials.

I also secured an affiliation with a Kigali-based NGO (non-governmental organization) before beginning the data-collection phase of the project. This affiliation was important for several reasons. First, the NGO was able

to provide me with the necessary documentation that I was expected to furnish when seeking interviews with government officials. Second, because I was a first-time researcher in Rwanda, I had to rely on the networks of NGO staff members to provide me with an initial set of interviewees. From there on, I planned on using snowball sampling techniques to identify and recruit additional respondents. In other words, I planned on asking my early interviewees whether they knew or would be willing to introduce me to additional respondents as a means of broadening my interviewee pool. Finally, I anticipated that many interviews would need to be conducted in Kinyarwanda. In fact, within contemporary Rwanda, it is well recognized that English proficiency tends to denote a privileged political and socioeconomic status. Not being fluent in Kinyarwanda myself, I worked with NGO staff members to (1) translate my questionnaires from English and Kinyarwanda, and (2) serve as translators during Kinyarwanda interview sessions.

Due to the sensitive nature of this project, I did not plan or seek permission to record my interviews. Rather, I sought to take copious notes during each session to collect interviewees' accounts of their experiences with, and opinions of, the *gacaca* tribunals and the ICTR.

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## Research Practicalities

### Ethical Considerations

Having conducted an extensive literature review, identified a research question, obtained an in-country affiliation, and settled on plans for data collection, I traveled to Kigali, Rwanda, in July 2010 to commence fieldwork. Beyond making the decision not to record interview sessions and being aware of the reality that, as Yolande Bouka (2013) has described, “affront[ing] the [Rwandan state’s] authorized discourse on justice” can result in grave consequences for ordinary citizens, I had also decided not to ask respondents about their ethnicity (p. 108). Finally, I recognized that the tightly controlled sociopolitical context of post-genocide Rwanda would mean that the best that I could hope to do was build “partially trusting” relationships with my interviewees (Chakravarty, 2012). In other words, while there would be some topics that I could plan to probe with respondents—such as collecting descriptive accounts of different approaches to promoting justice and reconciliation in the post-violence context—I knew that other subjects, including matters of ethnicity and ethnic identification, could not be discussed with respondents.

### Sampling and Location

I planned to carry out 45 to 50 interviews for this project. Relying on snowball sampling techniques, my primary focus was on interviewing ordinary Rwandans who had some experience of different justice and reconciliation institutions, and so I anticipated that the majority of my interviewees would belong to this category. But the Rwandan regime has also developed a powerful narrative about the strengths of its model of post-conflict reconstruction, which has highlighted the role of domestic institutions such as the *gacaca* courts (Republic of Rwanda, 2009, 2010; Rutayisire, 2012). To situate ordinary Rwandans' opinions about

*gacaca* and the ICTR within a broader framework of the country's post-violence transition, therefore, I planned on interviewing government officials as well as academic and policy experts. Finally, should the opportunity present itself, I hoped to observe *gacaca* trials, which were now in their final phase of operation.

To put respondents at ease, I left the location of interview sessions up to my interlocutors. For government officials, academics, and policy experts, we often met at their offices. However, interviews with ordinary Rwandans took place across varied locations, including in their homes, at marketplaces, at cafés, as well as at the office of the NGO with which I was affiliated. I did not provide respondents with stipends or pay them for their time.

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## Method in Action

During the planning phase of this project, I had carefully considered the ethical dilemmas and challenges that I was likely to face in conducting research in post-conflict Rwanda. Despite my best efforts to put careful safeguards in place—including making deliberate decisions about topics that I would not probe—upon commencing the project I found that ordinary citizens were often very fearful about speaking to a foreign researcher such as myself. In fact, even when I was introduced to them through staff members of the NGO with which I was affiliated, many respondents voiced concerns about whether I would be able to protect their anonymity. Some asked me explicitly about why I wanted to collect their opinions about difficult issues such as violence and post-conflict reconstruction in Rwanda.

After having several such conversations within the first few days of my arrival in the country, I realized that my original plans for the project would need to be overhauled considerably. Given the fraught and sensitive context within which I was conducting the research, a positivist line of inquiry, which assumed the “stability” and “know-ability” of the social world and proceeded systematically from concept development all the way to data analysis, was no longer tenable (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 94). Rather, it became clear that I would have to adopt an interpretive approach, which sought to uncover how Rwandans' opinions about justice and reconciliation were products of a specific history and a particular sociopolitical context in which they were embedded.

Practically, this meant implementing a number of revisions to the original research plan. First, I eliminated questions that asked ordinary Rwandans to compare *gacaca* with the ICTR and speak about the strengths and weaknesses of each institution. Second, I provided interviewees with the opportunity to define key concepts including “justice” and “reconciliation” on their own terms. In other words, rather than entering the research with (1) preconceived notions of what justice and reconciliation should look like and (2) operational criteria about how these concepts should be measured, I embraced the idea that Rwandans likely had their own understandings of these issues given the particular post-conflict setting within which they were rebuilding their lives.

Upon making these important adjustments, I had more success in securing interviews. It also became clear

that as opposed to my earlier attempts, where many interviewees had perceived me with some suspicion, an interpretive approach—wherein I embraced the tension between my a priori expectations of research and my actual experiences on the ground—allowed me to develop relationships of “partial trust” with respondents (Chakravarty, 2012). This is because in their readings of me, respondents no longer saw me as a foreign researcher who was in Rwanda primarily to advance her own career but as an individual who was truly willing to engage with their experiences of conflict and post-conflict reconstruction.

Two aspects of the original research design that I did retain were (1) choosing not to record interview sessions and (2) not asking respondents questions about their ethnicity. Although I cannot be sure of this, my sense is that along with adopting an interpretive approach, which was attuned to “individual and community meaning-making processes,” these decisions helped me to secure the confidence of my interviewees and ultimately uncover a rich array of insights about ordinary Rwandans’ understandings of justice and reconciliation in the post-genocide context (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 98).

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## Practical Lessons Learned

There is a rich literature from Rwanda (Thomson, Ansoms, & Murison, 2013) and beyond (Sriram, King, Mertus, Martin-Ortega, & Herman, 2009) on the challenges of conducting field research in conflict and post-conflict settings. While a number of studies on this subject have focused on the security-related risks that researchers can face in such contexts (Mertus, 2009), others have highlighted the administrative and bureaucratic impediments that often stand in the way of access and data collection (Argenti-Pillen, 2003; Thomson, 2009).

During fieldwork in Rwanda, I found myself confronting yet another challenge: the fear and suspicion of research participants who were uncomfortable with the idea of speaking to a foreigner in a tightly controlled political setting. For those considering conducting projects of a similar nature or working in comparable contexts, below are three important tips to keep in mind:

1. Be aware that you are being read: Although qualitative researchers pay considerable attention to framing their research in appropriate and transparent ways to subjects, something that I had not considered prior to beginning my fieldwork in Rwanda were the concrete ways in which interviewees would “read” me and respond to my identity and positionality. Being cognizant of such matters at the design stage of the research could have helped me to save precious time in the field. These issues are especially important to consider when conducting research on sensitive topics where access to interviewees and other materials—such as archival sources—are already likely to be fraught.
2. Embrace the need for adjusting and re-adjusting your research plans: As Peregrine Schwartz-Shea and Dvora Yanow (2012) note, because of the complex nature of the social world, anticipating the ways in which one might be “read” in the field “can only be preparatory and conjectural, rather than predictive” (p. 82). Thus, while thinking about the various ways in

which one might be perceived is a vital aspect of interpretive research design, scholars who adopt such an approach should also be willing to make adjustments to their original research plans upon entering the field. In this sense, any findings of interpretive work should be treated as the result of the co-generation of data between the researcher and the individuals and communities among which he or she works. In my case, this adjustment and co-generation process involved eliminating a number of previously devised questionnaire items in favor of letting ordinary Rwandans narrate their own experiences of the country's major justice and reconciliation institutions.

3. Value what interviewees are willing and unwilling to share with you: Conducting research on difficult topics such as conflict and post-violence reconstruction is challenging regardless of whether such work is carried out using a positivist or interpretivist lens. However, as Holstein and Gubrium (1995) note, the main role of the interpretivist interviewer is to "activate narrative production," which illuminates processes of meaning-making rather than test deductively generated hypotheses (p. 39). Such an objective not only requires researchers to engage in "bottom-up in-situ" concept development but also to respect what research subjects are willing and unwilling to share (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 49). During the course of my fieldwork, for instance, I found that for many Rwandans, reconciliation was understood to be synonymous with coexistence rather than a positive peace or a deep friendship. To quote one interviewee, "reconciliation involves reconstructing ties between ethnic communities [but] friendship is too hard to achieve" (interview with a *gacaca* participant, Kigali, July 15, 2010). Had I relied on a positivist orientation to carry out my research in Rwanda, the prior conceptual and operational criteria that I had devised would likely have led me to discard such understandings of reconciliation as being limited and inadequate.

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## Conclusion

By using post-conflict Rwanda as an illustrative case, this discussion has highlighted the ways in which interpretive methods can serve to illuminate complex themes in tightly controlled political settings. Conducting research in a context like contemporary Rwanda is fraught with several challenges, which include the language and terminology that is and is not allowed by the regime, the ethical implications that are wrapped up in fieldwork, and crucial issues of access. To overcome these challenges, upon arriving in the country in the summer of 2010, I learned that rather than relying on a positivist orientation, I would need to adopt an interpretivist stance. By eliminating several previously devised interview questions and by allowing ordinary Rwandans to take the lead in their conversations with me, I was able to uncover rich and nuanced understandings of justice, reconciliation, and the various institutions that had been set up to pursue these ends both inside and outside the country. As opposed to my previously designed positivist study, the use of interpretive methods also allowed me to build "partially trusting" relationships with respondents, which in turn helped in the co-generation of research findings (Chakravarty, 2012).

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## Exercises and Discussion Questions

1. What are the major differences between positivist and interpretivist approaches to social science research?
  2. Beyond the major challenges listed in this case, what additional challenges might researchers encounter when doing work in tightly controlled political settings?
  3. What are the strengths of interpretive methods with regard to conducting research in tightly controlled political settings?
  4. Under what conditions and for what kinds of projects might a positivist approach be appropriate in the social sciences?
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