Questions and Answers

An ethnography of evaluation in Afghanistan

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ASKING AGAIN AND AGAIN: MOVING BETWEEN QUESTIONS IN DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH IN AFGHANISTAN

Abstract

This paper is about asking questions in a study about transportation in the South of Afghanistan. I conducted this study in 2011 as an anthropologist employed by a research organization in Kabul. The paper follows two trajectories. One is the process of understanding transportation in the South of Afghanistan. The second is the transformation of an anthropologist in development research into an anthropologist of development research. The paper starts with an exploration of the worlds of transportation that are brought into being, first, in questionnaires and, second, in interviews. What follows is a discussion of how the questionnaires and interviews became critical stakes in the relation between my supervisor and me. This paper borrows from academic reflections on the relation between development theory and post-development theory to consider this relation beyond critique. Moreover, it considers movement as part of the method of asking questions. Following a move from the research organization in Kabul to an academic office in Amsterdam, I revisit the questions asked in and about development research. This analytical move of ‘asking again’ questions the bases of critique, as it opens up to the similarities and differences between anthropology and development research as modes of engagement that attempt to understand, represent and work within a complex world.

Keywords: questions, questionnaires, interviews, critique, anthropology, development theory, Afghanistan
INTRODUCTION

In 2010 and 2011 I worked as a researcher of the Dutch and Australian military and development mission in the southern Afghan province of Uruzgan. The Afghan research organization Mediating Research (MR) that employed me was required to deliver several research papers as part of a research contract with the Australian embassy. These papers were supposed to inform the Australian mission in Uruzgan and one of them was a commissioned study on transportation in that region. Before starting the research, our organization sent the Australian embassy an outline of what the report was meant to cover. This was intended to give the embassy a sense of our research direction and an opportunity to provide input. We had organized all of our questions in this outline:

**IMAGE 2** Part of the transportation brief
The Australian embassy was shocked by the simplicity of these questions and was disturbed by the fact that we knew almost nothing about trucking in Uruzgan even if it was the lifeblood of trade, of crime, of communications, and ultimately of power in Uruzgan. They found that our outline looked like it had been put together by people who were completely ignorant about transportation matters and advised us to find someone with a transport economics background for more rigor. Our team’s supervisor was concerned that they expected too much and replied that our research organization did not employ anyone with this expertise. I was put in charge of the data collection and writing of the report even though I had very little experience in Afghanistan and no background in transportation studies. I was a research officer at the time, simultaneously doing a PhD in anthropology on the topic of research practices in the context of the international intervention.

This interaction between the research organization and the Australians gives us the elements of this paper. The Australians found the questions of the outline too simple as it only investigated transportation as the act of carrying people and goods from A to B, in certain frequencies and certain volumes. They wanted a paper that would understand transportation in its relations to trade, crime and power. They questioned our expertise and suggested we get someone on board who would be able to ask better questions. They employed three modes of asking questions here — each imagining transportation differently. These modes are exemplified by questionnaires, interviews, and a critical setting for asking research questions.

More generally, this paper is set within a larger discussion on the performativity of methods — the notion that the world is not an external reality to be grasped by methods or questions. Instead, the world happens alongside our methods for knowing: our questions enact our worlds. As Law (2009), for example, discusses in an article on the large-scale Eurobarometer survey, surveys do not just produce data on, in this case, European citizen’s attitudes towards animal welfare. They enact many more layers such as the reality of the European project, or the reality of populations as amendable to statistical representation. In line with this kind of work, this paper will discuss not only how transportation information is gathered through questionnaires and interviews, but also how distinctions between local and international, or development research and anthropological research are established in the process. Moreover, it establishes what counts as a question and an answer, who may ask or respond and what transportation knowledge begins to look like (See for others who have explored interviews and questions: Savransky, 2014; Despret, 2008; Callon and Raberahisoa, 2004). The intricacies and messiness of asking questions allows me to argue that questions not only enact worlds, but worlds also need to be aligned, or moved, in order to be able to ask these questions. This insight seems to bring methods fully into the midst of
things, giving up on the idea that they are brought to bear only on phenomena external to them. Methods, phenomena and worlds move each other and happen alongside one another, something that is not always explicit in debates on the performativity of method.

However, people and their modes of asking questions do not always come together in the most generative and generous way, as we will see. Moving away from researching development in Afghanistan to studying it from an office at the University of Amsterdam enabled me to appreciate the specificities of anthropological and development research. These specificities have long been stakes in a debate between development theory and post-development theory. Development theorists, on the one hand, believe in the possibility of development and are working towards an ever further refinement of methods and theories. Post-development theorists, on the other hand, are critical of development and concerned with revealing the power imbalances that are masked by the discourse of development. Several authors argue that the critical mode of this debate has led to an impasse in development theory, inviting us to think beyond critique (Rottenburg 2009; Venkatesan and Yarrow 2012; Lewis and Mosse 2006; Donovan 2014). Inspired by these reflections on the relationship of critique between anthropology and development has helped me to see these two not as deficient by comparison, but productive in their own right through juxtaposition. It is this move from critique to juxtaposition that I borrow for the opposition at hand: evaluation research versus ethnography.

Before getting into the different modes of asking questions, let me lay out the structure of our research organization. Our team was made up of the Kabul based team and the field office in Uruzgan. The team in Kabul consisted of our supervisor who was an “international” with extensive knowledge of Afghanistan and more than a decade of experience in evaluation research, our Afghan project leader, several Afghan staff, an American trainee, and me, a research officer. Our field staff in Uruzgan, whose help I was to enlist for the transportation research, was made up of several local people and young Afghans from other provinces. Two of them managed the different research projects initiated by the staff in Kabul; one of them was assigned to me as my translator and the rest were involved in collecting, analyzing, cleaning or translating data. Most men worked, ate and slept in our field office, so in addition to their professional occupations there was lots of hanging out. Our field staff relied on surveyors — based in their respective districts (see image 2) — who reported on district affairs. It was these surveyors that I was going to ask to conduct a questionnaire to collect data on transportation in their districts. However, as my supervisor called to mind,
... our surveyors are not really experienced researchers, and they are not good at probing at all. So for us to get the info we want, we have to design the questions in such a way that they are bullet proof — no space for interpretation and generally rather straightforward. Often best to do it in a semi-quantitative format, for them to start and then one can follow up. I suggest the form of a table.

My supervisor's words described the conundrum of our evaluation task: our local staff in Uruzgan was not considered to have the same research skills as the internationals. They did not know how to ask questions or how to probe and pry in order to get good data. They were the ones, however, who could travel to the far off, insurgency-ridden places that our research commissioners were most interested in. The internationals did not have the linguistic or cultural skills, nor would their insurance policies cover injuries incurred in these areas. This meant that I could not send the surveyors a list of open questions, but instead I had to design a questionnaire that would turn them into keen research assistants collecting reliable data in the field. In order to achieve this, I would have to design solid questionnaires and prepare the office and the surveyors to take these into the field.

In what follows, I will first discuss the questionnaire and then contrast it with the quite different genre of the interview, which as an anthropologist I felt was the better research tool. I will analyze the particular ways in which these methods shape both the object of knowledge — transportation — and the style of knowing this object — the research protocol and the interview practice. I will then discuss the way these related through a mode of questioning and critique. I will end with a discussion about the shift from being an anthropologist in evaluation research to an anthropologist of evaluation research and, concomitantly, from a critical mode of questioning to asking again.
IMAGE 3 Map of Uruzgan (MR, 2009)
DESIGNING A QUESTIONNAIRE

What are the (major) items that people transport? What goes from Uruzgan to elsewhere?
What goes from elsewhere to Uruzgan? What goes through Uruzgan from elsewhere to elsewhere?
Are these items transported individually or through companies?
Who are those companies and what is their respective volume?
What are the routes they prefer, can take, cannot take, are avoiding? Why?
How accessible are the districts and what are the effects of this accessibility?
What are the problems that individual transporters or commercial truckers experience? (costs, insecurity, paperwork, bribes, checkpoints)
How can these problems be solved?
What comes in, goes out by air? What are the problems of this mode of transportation?

These were the questions I wanted to send to the field staff, as a way to prepare them for my arrival and get them to start thinking about potential informants. My supervisor misunderstood this list as a first attempt at a questionnaire. She sent back what was going to be the first of a long series of versions of the transportation questionnaire (image 3 below) in an increasingly heated argument about how to do development research well.

I worked on her revisions the next day. In the context of a parallel project for which we had designed an expansive questionnaire, I had just learned that the surveyors had not been able to handle the enormous pile of paperwork. Extensive questions did not yield comprehensive data, I concluded. I did, however, want to gather as much information as possible on anything related to transportation. And so in my new questionnaire I tried to strike a balance between being concise and exploratory. My attempt (image 4) started off with the table format that was requested by my supervisor, where I recorded characteristics around one transported item. Underneath this table was a list of questions and suggested answers arranged around topics such as what problems people would encounter on their transportation routes, or how influential actors from the province controlled transportation.
2. What are the (major) items that people transport? Should we not give them some categories, and then ask for specifics? Such as asking to rank what of the following is mainly transported (fruits, vegetables, animals/livestock, machinery, construction material...). And when you ask major, do you mean in volume transported, or what brings the most income. So this may also still need qualification.

3. What is transported from Uruzgan to elsewhere? Here I would make a table, as I think more specifics could be asked. The table could actually be expanded, by adding columns to it, such as costs for such transport; length of route in kms but also hours, problems encountered (such as insecurity). Might be a good basic tables that interviewers could fill by speaking to truckers and bazarris. Would be a first start for interviews I think.

Exported from Uruzgan (full suggested table see last page)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Going to (ultimate destination)</th>
<th>Route taken (roads)</th>
<th>Areas crossed through</th>
<th>Type of vehicle used</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fruit</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vegetables</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

IMAGE 4 The first modifications of the initial list of seven general questions about transportation in Uruzgan
QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

How did these three steps — from the initial list of open-ended questions to the latest version of the transportation questionnaire — imagine transportation and research context? I had first asked questions about the what, where and when of transportation which invited the respondent to think freely about a few topics such as transportation routes, security, accessibility, problems and solutions. I then started to suggest answers to these questions, which came in the form of even more open questions. The result was an expanding list of questions that only very loosely outlined the topic of transportation. Transportation was configured as a process of moving items along a route.
This was replicated in the way the questionnaire was to be administered: in the accompanying table each item was transported through each cell to register its characteristics.

However, whereas I could expect that the surveyor and his respondent would both understand questions about geographical trajectory or volume of the item and manage to fit the answer in the small cell, this did not work for all the questions. Questions about problems encountered en route ran the risk of side tracking the respondent. Quite literally, lengthy answers would have to be written outside of the cells that were supposed to contain them. But also figuratively, if the surveyor and I did not share the same understanding of what a problem was, the answer would fail to connect us and keep us on parallel tracks.

The open questions that followed were even less to the point, with questions about a trucker’s biggest fears or suggested solutions to transportation problems. These questions were more suggestive of issues of mobility\(^1\) as they inquired after ambitions that were or were not made possible by transportation. Here too the answers would be too wordy and therefore incommensurable, which made this version of the questionnaire altogether unsuitable for data collection – as my supervisor pointed out to me. What we needed were terms that were less ambiguous than change, problems or fears. If the goal was to transform the surveyor-respondent pair into a Q&A machine, it would help to give them answers to choose from. Not too many, however, because this might derail the process of data collection as well. Just a few safe answers. Before I arrive at a closer analysis of what this meant for the way both the survey setting and transportation as an issue became envisioned alongside one another, let me first discuss what happened to the questionnaire.

As the goal was to let the surveyors tick boxes rather than handle open questions, my supervisor thought the new version of the questionnaire was far from ideal. Back in Kabul, and feeling quite frustrated, I tried my hand at a new one. The table format still proved too complicated, so I first came up with a list of questions with multiple-choice answers. These I could then transform in what in the end turned out to be a very clunky table.

My supervisor replied that she thought the table format would not work for this set of questions. She wanted to display the data in the report as a cross table (a matrix that displays the frequency distribution between two kinds of variables) and so we needed individual, quantitative questionnaires. She revised my questionnaire, kept some parts of the tables and added a list of multiple-choice questions. This became the questionnaire that was, in the end, translated and distributed among the surveyors.

\(^1\) Sheller and Urry (2006) and Shaw and Hesse (2010), among others, make this distinction to delimit the academic fields of transportation studies and mobility studies. The authors define mobility as a possibility rather than a static fact, with effects not just on public space but on people’s subjectivities, global migrations, or urban segregation. I will discuss this more in the next section.
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• Who needs transport?
  o Local businessmen
  o Personal transport
  o Contractor
  o Ngos
  o ISAF
  o Other

• And who do they turn to for transport?
  o They have family/connections they arrange it with
  o They go to the stand in the district center or Kandahar and find a transporter
  o Other

• Who are the transporters and what is the volume that they transport?
  o They own a car privately and use it for transport of people and goods whenever it’s needed.
  o They run a shop and have one or two trucks
  o They are transporters and own one truck
  o They are a transport business and own several trucks
  o They are trade business and own several trucks
  o Other

• What is transporred, from where to where, and during particular seasons?
  o People
  o Fresh vegetables and fruit
  o Non-perishable food
  o Construction material
  o Car parts
  o Clothes
  o Medical drugs
  o Illegal goods
  o Opium/Hashish
  o Other
### ASKING AGAIN AND AGAIN

**Questions for the Bazaar’s TK**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transport demand</th>
<th>what do they need transport for?</th>
<th>who does the transportation?</th>
<th>what do they pay for transport (per load, man, trip)?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>small businessman (no employees)</td>
<td>they own trucks (how many?)</td>
<td>paid by themselves or family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>big businessman (employees)</td>
<td>they hire a trucking company</td>
<td>paid by the company or contractors, friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>individuals</td>
<td>they go to the stand</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>contractor</td>
<td>they have relatives or friends with trucks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>track</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S&amp;D</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other (specify)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**IMAGE 6** From multiple-choice answers to clunky tables
6. How do you bring the Goods to Tirin Kot (or note name of bazaar in other districts)
   - We import with our own car(s) __________________________ (note down number and type of cars)
   - We import with our own truck(s) __________________________ (note down number and type of trucks)
   - We import with help of family/friends ________________________ (note down number and type of trucks, and if friend or family)
   - We hire individual transporters ____________________________ (note down if car or truck and how many; or if by maan how many)
   - We hire a trucking company ________________________________ (name and load, trucks, maan)
   - Uses a turn seller (describe how often)
   - Other __________________________________________________ (describe, including air transport)

7. How often do you use trucking on average (own transport) to bring goods to your shop?
   - ______ times a week
   - Once a week
   - Once a month
   - ______ times a month
   - Other (explain) ___________________________________________

8. Cost of Transport, note in average costs
   - Fuel per week (if own cars are used) _________________________
   - Fuel per month (if own cars are used) _________________________
   - Per car/truck load (if hired) ________________________________ ; and note how often per week/month this happens _____________
   - Per maan (if hired) ________________________________________ ; and note how often per week/month this happens _____________

9. What costs other than fuel/trucks do you have for transport
   - Security (explain arrangements costs)
   - Taxes (explain how much per maan or truck)
   - Other (explain)
ASKING AGAIN AND AGAIN

What changed in these last three questionnaires? In relation to the sprawling list of open-ended questions (image 4), the questionnaire that followed (image 5) offered much clearer contours, as they were now defined by the multiple answers. Offering a few possible answers made it easier for the surveyors to ask the question, while still leaving room for surprising answers through the option Other. The list of questions was clear and clean, giving a solid impression of transportation relations and the way the survey was to take place. There were people in need of transportation; there were providers and there was stuff being transported. And one could just move through the questions, from top to bottom. The table (image 5) messed this up, leaving us with a very confusing impression of transportation relations and of the direction in which we had to work through the questionnaire. In the table it was unclear what the difference was between the question and the category of the answer, and it was unclear whether to move down, sideways or just consider each cell on its own.

The format of the final questionnaire (image 6) reminded me of the exercises for learning a foreign language. In conversational style one had to finish a sentence: “how do you...?” “we do...”. This questionnaire was so easy to understand that it hardly seemed a tool anymore and the question hardly a question. Respondents just needed to speak along with the text; the surveyor would be there to collect what was on one’s tip of the tongue. The collected words could seemingly (transparently and simply) be handed over to the headquarters as data. This system relied, however, on the assumption that both surveyor and respondent shared our understanding of any of the questions on transportation and the potential benefits of collecting data on these questions. We, the designers of the questionnaires, knew that there were misunderstandings between the surveyors and us, as we had often got back questionnaires in other projects with spaces left blank. Now that these questionnaires had transformed data collection into a simple and natural form of human speech, there was less reason to doubt that the surveyors would understand their task or to assume that they invented or guessed the answers themselves.

The way we questionnaire designers anticipated the more or less imagined survey setting is that the practical limitations of the survey form interacted with the way transportation was imagined. There were many aspects to it: the incapacity of surveyor and respondent in dealing with open questions or of conveying nuanced issues such as fears or problem solutions; the expectation that any nuance would get lost in translation between survey setting and headquarters; the assumption that our cultural differences would get in the way of a shared framework for concepts such as problems or change; and the considerations of the survey as an embodied practice of people with limited time and attention spans. These expectations interacted with a desire for a representative image of transportation for which we needed countable, quantifiable statements and numbers. The questionnaire was the best format for this. Wordy and unqualified
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statements did not fit in this format, and so transportation transformed from a complex problem of fears and access and issues of mobility to a series of transportation routes to be plotted on a map, and frequencies, volumes and prices to be compared, and their distributions visualized in tables, maps, and indicators.

INTERVIEWS

Alongside the design of the questionnaire I conducted a series of interviews. These were supposed to guide the design of the questionnaires and provide contextualization for the data coming from the questionnaires. Only in a few instances did these interviews in fact help me to ask better questions in the questionnaire. They were, however, good for getting at a different kind of transportation reality. Moreover, the interview positioned the interviewer and informant differently than the survey setting.

During my first week in Uruzgan, I interviewed 19 people. I held audience in a room in the field office, which was also the place where I slept and ate. I would sit on a toshak (a sitting mattress) and the kitchen help would bring me tea, raisins and nuts. During a good day I would speak to four or five people. I would give the staff a list of names or kinds of people, like shopkeepers or truck drivers. They would find some of these people and bring them to my room where we would introduce ourselves via our translator.

The first interview I held was with the guard of our guesthouse, who doubled as our driver and was, as a local, well-connected in Uruzgan. He told me many things ranging from the products that were transported in and out of Uruzgan (dried apricots, rice, mung beans, raisins, krut (dried yoghurt), wheat, corn, flower, very fine wool, seating mattresses, tapestry, carpets, shoes, tea) to the routes that these products would travel (from the district centers to the provincial center to Kandahar to Wesh to Pakistan) to the rates of fuel, the condition of the roads (consistently terrible) to the types of cars and trucks that drove. This sort of matter-of-fact knowledge was easily accessible and transportable. There were other stories, however, in which I found it more difficult to figure out the organization of transportation. On the one hand, the guard said there were no transport companies in Uruzgan, on the other hand, he mentioned a man who owned a few trucks and exploited them commercially. He also mentioned a turn stand — a collective taxi point where individuals could find transporters for a ride. But then he confused me by saying that every village had access to a car and every family had a member who was a transporter.

The next interviewees were pharmacists, shopkeepers, car parts sales men, transporters, drivers, or government employees. I quickly skipped asking about the products that were trans-
ported, or the routes that were taken and knew ahead of time that my respondents would find the potholes the biggest nuisance of the transportation system. Instead I tried to grasp the way they used or offered transport and the level of formal organization or problems encountered. It was, for example, difficult to understand the logics of money in transportation. Not only was it not entirely clear whether amounts were in Pakistani Rupee, in Afghani or in dollars, but it was also not clear how people, if at all, distinguished between invested money, received money, profit, expenses; or how they would break up — again, if at all — their expenses into fuel, salaries, baksheesh, Taliban bribe, government bribe or other expenses.

The interviews quickly answered the questions of the preliminary questionnaire, helping me to formulate multiple-choice answers. Only sometimes did the interviews suggest a new topic that I wanted to add to the questionnaire. An example was from a transporter from Gizab, the district furthest away from Tirin Kot who brought up the existence of special hotels for transporters. He never used them, however, because bad people were staying there. When I asked what kind of people he found bad, he mumbled something about drug addiction and women. I decided to add a question about the social problems around transportation. Through the interviews I mostly tried to figure out how transport and life-worlds organized one another. This was something the questionnaire was not capable of figuring out. In interviews I could investigate networks and complexities much more easily. I could ask again and again whether I had understood the statement correctly; I could rephrase, ask someone else, or ask the question in a different context. Let me explain by the example of the turn stands.

Initially I was told that there was a car in each village. I assumed this car was collective property, a shared investment of the village. It took me a long time to understand that this car worked as a collective taxi — a more individual investment, for which a ticket was required. Not only was it passengers who had to buy a ticket, it turned out, but the drivers themselves as well. The ticket gave them a place at the turn stand — a queue of drivers waiting for their turn — which would sometimes take days to come up. I hadn’t realized I had been confusing the driver’s ticket for the passenger’s ticket until I had done some calculations of the amounts of money involved in transporting. The turn stand operator had revealed the ticket mystery to me but had added a new one by mentioning a tax percentage included in the turn stand ticket. This percentage was to be paid to the provincial tax office. I wondered how the provincial government made sure it collected all the taxes. I did not think the stand operator was the most reliable person to ask so I went to see the tax officer. This man showed me a stack of numbered tickets (image 8). Each ticket was made up of three parts: one for the driver, one for the checkpoints posted two kilometers into any major route, and one for the tax office. Upon purchase, the turn stand operator would give two parts to the driver and keep the third.
part. The driver would then keep one for himself and give the second one to checkpoint. The officer of the checkpoint would hand his part to the tax officer, who would later be able to match this to the stack of third parts that the turn stand operator was supposed to hand back to him.

This seemingly straightforward principle of the turn stand took me days to decipher through many conversations in the office with drivers, and later through trips in a blinded car to visit the tax collectors’ office and the different turn stands. These trips were required for myself, and for all my interlocutors (to figure out what I didn’t know or how to ask for the right answer). I felt like a detective who was constantly following things and people amidst figuring out the logics of where they were going. Transportation became not just the object of my interest; it became my mode of asking questions as well. My interest had gone beyond what items were transported where and in which quantities, and instead had moved into societal logics of taxation, of trade, and of ethnic and tribal distributions of power — all of which were made possible by transportation and, in turn, made this possible themselves. These were not issues of transportation anymore, but
issues of mobility. And in order to find out the logics of these transportations, distributions, or circulations my methods and I had to be mobile as well. This included being moved, even shaken up, and being able to move others too.²

I slowly realized that my biggest unknown was the poppy trade. I had asked a car seller quite early on how many cars he had sold that month and he responded that sales had been bad but that he expected to sell many next month following the poppy harvest. Next, someone told me that the safest district of Uruzgan, Deh Rawud, was only safe because of the flourishing poppy trade. Then, someone told me about the enormous problem of heroin addiction in Tirin Kot. And then when I was starting to finally get a grasp on people’s revenues from the transportation business and was struck by how little this was: the guard suggested that there was always the

² Büscher, Urry and Witchger (2010) make a case for mobile methods as a means to study the way that mobility impacts people’s lives. Studying movement, its potentials and blockings requires moving and being moved.
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poppy trade with which people could make ends meet. It disrupted my image of transportation which over time had slowly but surely stabilized. All along, the poppy trade had kept everything and everyone moving but me.

By this time, my relationship with my colleagues in the field office had changed. As the only female and international guest in the office, I had been treated with a lot of respect during my first week in Uruzgan and this had translated into a lonely existence. During my second trip my translator and I were invited to share meals with the other three men in the office: the mullah, the hajji and the guard. From then on, I spent the evenings with them, drinking tea, watching TV and talking about our lives. During these evenings we exchanged and explained our differences. As they were also the people that found informants for me, I asked if they could find me a poppy trader. In a series of answers that moved from our formal work relation into our informal evening hangouts, the guard said, first, that he could find me someone who knew more about the poppy trade. A day later he said he might find me someone who used to work in the drugs trade. When I asked whether he had been successful, he replied that he had gone ahead and asked my questions to a poppy trader. When he started to give me the answers of the supposed poppy trader it began to dawn on me that he himself was quite actively involved in it. He cheerfully related a whole new reality to me.

My anthropological fantasies of fieldwork seemed to be coming true. Its techniques were quite different from how my research organization wanted our transportation questions to work. Whereas my research organization wanted me to be very focused on the logic of transportation, “deep hanging out”, as Clifford Geertz (1998) called it, was much less directed. The guard, the hajji, the mullah and I would be asking about one another, slowly testing our relationship and finding topics of conversation that we were interested in discussing. The guard’s initial hesitation and ultimate proffer of information was a sign that he was “a recalcitrant subject” (Savransky, 2014), someone who was not obliged or trying to please me. It wasn’t that I had expected a compliant interlocutor. It was more that the guard was one of the few people that I had developed a relationship with over time. As I spoke to most of my interviewees only once or twice, it was not possible to gauge each other’s reliability. So far the people I had interviewed had been silent or vague about the topic of the poppy trade. It was likely not the safest topic to discuss in a conversation with a Dutch researcher translated by an Afghan who wasn’t from the province. For that reason, the topic of poppy cultivation had become a background issue for me. I didn’t know how to move my interlocutors to give me more information about the poppy trade, while at the same time I became less and less primed to the topic myself. The time I spent with the guard, on the other hand, brought the topic back to mind. The guard’s gradual shift from reluctance to willingness to share information made
it possible for me to take him and his information seriously.

The fact that the information was given recalcitrantly did not necessarily make it truer. Neither did this recalcitrance confirm anthropological fantasies of becoming best buddies with informants, of overlapping subjectivities (Despret, 2008) and shared interests. In our exchanges the guard and I may have been thinking together, yet we certainly did not transform into a “we” in all aspects. We had had a conversation earlier that week about his small salary and whether I could broker a potential raise with the Kabul office. This conversation was a sharp reminder that we were not rendered capable in the same way.

And so I learned something else about the research protocol. With lots of effort one could learn certain things bit by bit that would hold within the context of the research.3

But there was always a potential for recalcitrance. If it wasn’t in the form of an “objecting subject” — an interlocutor protesting against the course of the interview or someone volunteering information such as the guard — then it was a “subjecting object”, a topic, such as poppy trade, that slowly but surely interfered in the gradually stabilizing image of transportation or a conversation about salary interfering in an anthropological romance.

CRITIQUE

The questionnaire and the interviews configured transportation and research settings differently. Whereas the questionnaire turned transportation into an act of carrying items and information from A to B with quantifiable and therefore representative attributes, the interviews came to regard transportation and people’s worlds as mutually constitutive that was only knowable slowly and bit by bit. The questionnaire conceived of the research setting as constrained by time and skills which necessitated a bulletproof tool that would extract and transport information from Uruzgan to Kabul despite these constraints. The interview setting was one of carefully attuning to transportation relations and required mobile methods. How did the two relate in this specific research project? Was the questionnaire subservient to the interview or the other way around?

Time was pressing. We had a deadline with the Australians and I was going on leave and had to hand over my work to a team member. I had become increasingly critical and irritated, unsure

3 Instead of being true generally or universally, Despret (2008) describes the process of studying parrots and finding out what they are rendered capable of through the research apparatus, rather than figuring out what parrots are. As I was constantly unsure in my exchanges with my field colleagues as to what to understand as pattern and what to understand as anecdotal, Despret’s insight serves as a good compass in these matters.
about what the questionnaire was supposed to look like, how my supervisor wanted to use them most efficiently, how seriously to take the questionnaire’s respondents and what the information derived from these answers would look like. Moreover, I had established relationships and had started to learn a lot from them. It was not easy to hand over the understanding that I had built up with them. My supervisor, on the other hand, was unhappy about my incompetence regarding the design of the questionnaires. The design had taken too long and the questionnaires had only just been sent out to the surveyors, while our deadline with the Australians was coming up. She read it as an unwillingness to collaborate with the team and wanted me to work less solitarily. She emphasized that our profession was always about teamwork.

We communicated mostly via email. These emails followed the logic of question and answer themselves. Much of it was along the lines of asking the other what had happened, was happening or should happen, to which the other would send a response. This was a perfectly functional way of communicating in a relationship between a supervisor and an employee who needs to answer. Over time the inflection of our questions changed, however. Questions became more rhetorical or were replaced by demands altogether. Even the slightest of difference in tone would spark irritation.

We questioned each other over the place of protocol and what the right way of relating to it was. While working on the transportation research, I had to spend lots of time on other tasks, such as composing a working schedule for the Uruzgan team, designing questionnaires for other projects, checking on other people’s work progress, or attending team meetings. These tasks meant different things to me than to my supervisor. I thought a work schedule was a pointer, a guide to orient people, rather than something that had to be fully worked out. The same went for the questionnaires of other projects: I did not believe in the fact that these questionnaires could turn the inexperienced surveyor into a researcher who was capable of generating the data required by the report’s commissioners, so why try to make them perfect? For me it was good enough to have an orientation for what one might ask. Ultimately, I felt that these organizational tasks were simply keeping me from my main assignment: to understand transportation in Uruzgan. For my supervisor these tasks had different weight. They were not ways of orientating oneself, but ways of foreseeing, of planning ahead, of anticipating the many unknowns and interruptions of the Afghan context. Whereas she came up with many things to improve the organization of our team, these were unnecessary from my point of view. I thought it was pointless to have a new position occupied by an expensive consultant to measure the efficiency of our teamwork. It would only generate more tasks, more questioning and more disconnection amongst the members of our Uruzgan team.
ASKING AGAIN AND AGAIN

I thought it was pointless to have a shelf in our office where we could keep a paper copy of the minutes of the meetings if these would be on our computer anyway.

I became entrenched in my version of doing research. This ran the full gamut of reasonably wanting to do interviews to wanting to do all of this according to my own standards. I rebelled against office protocol by allowing people to stay over in our field office without first asking, or went on an irresponsible trip to Uruzgan’s high street to see if moneychangers would speak about their secret business of transporting and selling poppy. My supervisor, on the other hand, occupied the position of a manager, again across the scale from reasonably wanting to know how people’s work was coming along to managing every detail of what was happening. She started insisting more on the office protocol, telling me to cc everyone in my emails, to stick to official writing formats for minutes, and reminding me of female dress code and modesty in the office. With the exception of one successful but brief reconciliation brokered live, our emails became more and more a battlefield of attempts at the last word. This, in the end, led to my dismissal.

Our conflict was about different understandings of what it means to do evaluation research well. In my version, the emphasis was on understanding the details of transportation, which meant that I wanted to keep control over the research myself. I, as the researcher, was the focal point, the one to liaise with others, establish rapport with interviewees, and build up an understanding of transportation. The other, especially the organizational other, could only feature in my endeavor insofar as s/he could enable me. In my supervisor’s version, the emphasis was making knowledge of Uruzgan available to our donors, which was a multifaceted endeavor requiring teamwork over a longer stretch of time. The researcher was not very important, in fact, and was made to be fairly interchangeable with others through a system of accountability and information exchange. The focal point was she, as a manager of all the different contributors of this operation, making sure that everyone was on time and in line with regard to our contract with the Australians. Asking questions and being critical for her was a way of being responsible by getting everyone on board of the operation and ready in time for the deadline.

I moved back to Amsterdam to continue my PhD in anthropology. Far removed from the thorny situation, I had a chance to reflect on it by reading up on a debate about the current state of the development discourse. Even if the stakes in this debate do not match the differences between my supervisor and me, the relation of critique does. Reflecting on the epistemic effects of critique is my aim here.

Several authors have characterized this discourse as in a deadlock (Ziai, 2015; Lewis and Mosse, 2006; Venkatesan and Yarrow, 2012; Rottenburg, 2009).
The parties to this conflict were described as, first, the development theorists who were trying to make development work by ever refining the tools and theories of development. And second, there were the post-development theorists, many of whom came from anthropology and were critiquing the former by revealing the uneven effects of the power balance at the core of the development discourse. One of the frontrunners of post-development theory, Escobar, wrote in 1997, 

While development anthropologists focus on the project cycle, the use of knowledge to tailor projects to beneficiaries’ cultures and situation, and the possibility of contributing to the needs of the poor, the anthropologists of development centre their analysis on the institutional apparatus, the links to power established by expert knowledge, the ethnographic analysis and critique of modernist constructs, and the possibility of contributing to the political projects of the subaltern (505).

Venkatesan and Yarrow (2012) explain in general terms anthropology’s (or post-development’s) critique of development as a tendency to relate to development from a position of superiority. In contrast to the development industry, anthropology claims not to side with post-colonial powers but with the locals. This longstanding involvement with the supposed beneficiaries of development aid allows anthropology to claim superior empirical and theoretical knowledge and draw attention to development’s shortcomings by comparison.

Critique enacts a moral contrast (Law, 2004). It creates a world of ‘either … or’, of good or bad. Critique’s talent for pointing at contrasts is useful. Post-development’s concern with unmasking the politics of development disguised as merely technical or in the service of humanity has been extremely important. Equally so has it been useful to contrast knowledge that emerges from questionnaires with knowledge emerging from interviews and deep hanging out to grasp the limitations of both. However, to claim that one asks better questions than the other because of the other’s deficiency eclipses the extent to which anthropology and development in fact engage in the same endeavor, albeit through different practices. This moralizing prevents anthropology and development from being held against the same analytical standards. It creates blind spots through which the other’s validity and sensibility disappear from consideration. As Venkatesan and Yarrow have argued, anthropology’s mode of critique has reduced development actors to a role in the narrative of reproducing underdevelopment.
Anthropology’s mode of critique that Venkatesan and Yarrow describe resonates with the mode of critique that defined my relationship with my supervisor and these resonances have to do with the transportability of knowledge. Just as anthropology (again, in general terms) claimed superior empirical and theoretical knowledge, I insisted that my methodology yielded knowledge that was better, if only because I believed it stayed closer to actually lived realities of transportation. My organization, in analogy with development practice, however, felt that my deep hanging out got in the way of good development research, with its intention to make knowledge circulate and do work within development networks. Similar to post-development theory, I wanted to do research for the sake of research while remaining loyal to my interlocutors and trying to stay as close to their stories as possible. Development research, instead, was focused on making knowledge do work. It needed data that could easily circulate and inform and mobilize donors and practitioners. Post-development theory, on the other hand, was captivated by gaining an understanding that was as rich and complete as possible. Knowledge was an end in itself.

ASKING AGAIN

What to do about this impasse? As a response this paper revisited the questionnaire, the interviews and the critique: it asked again. In line with others who have tried to go beyond critique in development theory, I followed an ethnographic approach to development research, paying attention to the translations, materialities and purifications through which ideas and practices of development research come into being (Venkatesan and Yarrow, 2012; van Gastel, 2011; Mosse, 2005; Rottenburg, 2009; Donovan, 2014). I revisited the questionnaires, the interviews, and the situation of critique around the two ways of asking questions and suggested that particular ways of asking questions enact particular kinds of knowledge. Asking again, and again, is another style of asking questions, one that moves on from critique, from an anthropologist in development research into an anthropologist of development research.

Asking again and again was itself made possible by a move from my office in Kabul to an office in Amsterdam, which allowed for a different point of analytical departure. Emphasizing the shared endeavor of trying to learn, understand and work in a complex environment, I have tried to describe the specificities of asking in questionnaires and in interviews. Approaching these modes in
QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

juxtaposition and in symmetry, rather than in critical mode, has shifted the ways in which they are similar and different. Questionnaires and interviews enact different worlds of transportation and the knowledge that emerges from these modes of asking questions move in different ways as well. The questionnaire envisioned a static world of transportation but it had the strength that its quantified terms were easily transportable and communicable to donors and other interested people. The interviews constructed a more fluid world that was sensitive to surprise but not easily shared or handed over to colleagues or donors.

This paper allows me to make another point. Method doesn’t just enact worlds of transportation, as John Law has argued with regard to the Eurobarometer. Method requires movement itself: in order for it to be possible to ask a question, people and technologies need to be moved as well. Words and tables are moved around in the questionnaire; questionnaires have to be sent to the surveyors; as an interviewer I had to be driven around in a blinded car with a driver and translator to ask my questions. The elements of asking a question need to come together in successful ways in order for an answer and understanding to transpire. Asking questions requires attunement, sensitivity to the environment of the question and the capacity to be moved by its answer. If all this fails, move on and ask again.