




Rich scholar, poor scholar: inequalities in research capacity, “knowledge” abysses, and the value of unconventional approaches to research

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Abstract

The dominance of *modern* rationality in knowledge production implies that the distribution of intellectual capital highly depends on the capacity to gather representative data and generate generalizable theses. Furthermore, as research becomes more formalized and dominated by large funding schemes, intellectual capital allocation is increasingly associated with high economic, labor force and institutional power. This phenomenon has consequences at the global level. As the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has documented, there are significant disparities between countries in research capacities, with a marked difference between “core” countries with semi-monopolies over sanctioned knowledge production and “peripheral” states primarily used as data mines. The core–periphery divide in research capacity brings about what decolonial theorists call *knowledge abysses*: the widespread idea that core countries are the ultimate knowledge producers and thus the legitimate guides in humanity’s road to “progress.” In that context, the democratization of knowledge and the prevention of neo-colonial dynamics require the development of cheaper and more accessible ways of collecting representative data. In this article, we make a call for innovations in methods that can serve to overcome this, and we illustrate possible avenues for achieving sound research without incurring high financial costs by describing and discussing our experiences in researching narco-violence in Colombia and prostitution in Russia with what we call the “taxi method.”

Keywords Core–periphery · Democratization of knowledge · Intellectual capital · Inequality · Research capacity · Research methods

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Is science only for the rich?¹

In 2016, the US government proposed the *International Brain Initiative*, a mega-project that would create “universal brain mapping tools” and a “cloud-based data-sharing resource” (Reardon, 2016, p. 597). While scientists at the time was said to cheer the idea (e.g. in Reardon, 2016), there was a catch: the entry fee for the project was USD\$300 million, “thereby excluding poorer nations” (Dean, 2017, p. 8). Dean placed the event as one more example of a growing, two-fold trend: “scientific elitism” that focuses on “new data-rich approaches to brain mapping and very large-scale genetic studies” (Dean, 2017, p. 8). Scientists in the natural sciences have engaged in debates around the exclusion of economically poor nations from knowledge production due to lack of funds to invest in research that gets recognized as excellent: *Nature* published a special issue with the bottom line “researchers like to think that nothing matters in science except the quality of people’s work. But the reality is that wealth and background matter a lot” (“Is science only for the rich?”, 2016, p. 466). Smithers and colleagues explained the magnitude of the consequences of the global economic and knowledge divide: “the domination of the scientific agenda and literature by northern over southern researchers has serious implications for how science is designed and produced, undermining its salience, credibility and legitimacy—and therefore its influence on policy development and implementation” (Smithers et al., 2016, p. 31).

Criminologists—concerned with studying instances of criminality, harm, and victimization—have acknowledged the dominance of Europe and North America in the discipline and the derived detrimental consequences for economically impoverished countries (Agozino, 2003, 2004; Carrington et al., 2016, 2018, 2019a). The figures are telling, as “between 1994 and 2013, North America and western Europe together accounted for 80% of all publications on inequalities and social justice” (Denis & Leach, 2016, p. 31). However, criminologists have not discussed what natural scientists have: how a development where macro-project financing affects the distribution of intellectual capital and derived political power. In this article, we face that discussion by asking, can “poor” criminologists create knowledge of equal explanatory value as “rich” ones? If so, how?

The setting where we explore these questions is one of the ivory towers and trenches, with significant income and research funding gaps at the global level. All measurements of how much states invest in *research and development* (R&D) point to a world divide. The Global Innovation Index, created by the World Intellectual Property Organization (2019), documents that in 2017, high-income countries (the United States and Western European nations) covered 64% of the global investment in research. Meanwhile, low-income countries (Latin American, Caribbean, and Sub-Saharan states) represented only 2.9% of the investment. While the 2021 Index does not provide statistics for differential investment in research worldwide, it indicates that the United States invests the most (World Intellectual Property Organization, 2021). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

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(UNESCO Institute for Statistics, n.d.) found that while in 2019 the world reached a record of 1.7 trillion dollars invested in R&D, ten countries accounted for 80% of the total spending. On the list of the 15 countries with higher investments in research appear 11 European countries, three emergent Asian economies (Korea, Japan, and Singapore), and Australia. The report of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2021) underscores the same point. While some Asian countries are getting into the mix, Western European and North American states allocate the most economic capital and labor force for research worldwide. Unsurprisingly, UNESCO asserted that “there are huge disparities in research capacities across countries” (Sané, 2010, p. iv).

Western academia is the contemporary cognition ruler. This globally dominating system of knowledge creation privileges the capacity to gather “representative data” and generate generalizable theses as the ultimate form of intellectual activity (Adams & Lawrence, 2019; Dean, 2017). In Western academia, individuals and organizations become more powerful by amassing *intellectual capital*: the “accumulated labor” they can exchange for “social energy” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 246)—what in today’s academic lingo is termed *impact*. The thirst for large-scale studies in Western academia, combined with the global economic resource inequality, entails that those who can conduct macro-studies (“rich scholars”) can claim the most intellectual capital for themselves and their host institutions and countries. As knowledge is power (Bacon, 2010; Foucault, 1990; Hobbes, 2011), economically rich countries get more power from knowledge than their poor counterparts do. Gaps in income become gaps in research investment, which turn into gaps in intellectual capital and so in political power. In our scenery, power gaps produce harm and further inequalities (Amin, 2009; Böhm, 2018; Carrington et al., 2019b; Connell, 2007; Franko & Goyes, 2019; Goyes, 2021; Walters, 2006). Thus, we face a dizzying situation in which diverse global inequalities are self-reinforcing and create conflicts and injustices.

The “international community” has failed several times at fulfilling grand plans of global equality to distribute economic, political, and scientific power more evenly; it has even enlarged the power abysses while allegedly trying to reduce them (Easterly, 2007; Ziai, 2015). In this paper, we thus propose an approach that can produce incisive, transferrable insights for social scientists without incurring high costs. While we currently work in the global North, we too have faced the challenges of trying to say something profound about society while short on budget. We divide this text into six sections after this introduction: In “Disparities and creativity in academia,” we give an overview of the current proposals for unconventional forms of data collection, which seek scientific inclusivity despite diverse forms of social injustice. In “Hierarchies of knowledge,” we trace the historical trajectory of how our scene of global power gaps got to be what it is today. In “Researching from the periphery,” we describe the challenges that researchers without funding might face when conducting fieldwork. In “Affordable knowledge,” we present our method proposition and explain why inexpensive research methods can provide data as incisive as macro-projects. “Uses, techniques, and limitations” discusses the practicalities of applying what we call the taxi method as well as its shortcomings. In “Ways to understanding,” we conclude our article by discussing two “speeds” of conducting fieldwork—we there contrast macro-studies to individual observations of everyday life. Addition-

ally, we acknowledge that our proposal is context-specific but argue that it is an example of an affordable approach researchers can apply to come up with transferable insights.

Disparities and creativity in academia

Researchers have warned that we must reconsider whether we continue distributing academic *prestige* based on the type and size of data collection. The presence of gender inequality in criminology is a key concern, and studies have identified that men publish more in top-tier journals than women (Crow & Smykla, 2015) and more often are editors or part of boards of prestigious journals (Toro-Pascua & Martín-González, 2022). Some of this can be accredited to the higher status of quantitative research within particularly US-based criminology (Faria & Dodge, 2023; Jacques, 2014), which female criminologists apply less often than male (Crow & Smykla, 2015). Besides gender bias in scholarly hierarchies, gender is likely to also impact what kind of scholar men and women are considered to be, which is relevant to our interrogation here of the relationship between methods and inequality. Günel et al. (2020) investigated “the gendered (masculinist) assumptions of the always available and up-for-anything fieldworker.” For them, phenomena like “expectations of work–life balance” and “environmental concerns” demand that we rethink fieldwork as only instances of long-term immersion far away from home and remark that the professional/private life arenas remain gendered, thus hindering women and queer academics from conducting time-intensive fieldwork. Therefore, they proposed a *patchwork ethnography*: “ethnographic processes and protocols designed around short-term field visits, using fragmentary yet rigorous data, and other innovations that resist the fixity, holism, and certainty demanded in the publication process.” Their perspective seeks to work “with rather than against the gaps [and] constraints.”

These commentators worry about how inequality within academia impacts scholars and academic institutions. In this context, we are most concerned with privileging particular ways of producing knowledge. Günel et al. (2020) have analyzed how gender divides prevent women from engaging in what men consider the ultimate form of fieldwork; they have also criticized quantitative researchers’ disdain for qualitative work. The risk is that the recognition of knowledge’s value is based on how much researchers can invest in their projects, not on the quality and critical potential of the work. While our concern is about the economy, the roots of the issue precede contemporary money fetishism. Next, we provide an overview of the social dynamics that have led society to consider some forms of knowledge superior to others.

Hierarchies of knowledge

Knowledge inequalities are caused by deeply engraved global structures. The dominance of Western modernity, which began in colonial times, is one of the most potent causes. While it is problematic to take for granted that a uniform and distinctly Western form of modernity still permeates the global order (Mouffe, 2005), it is useful to

think of it as a form of rationality with a strong influence on global academia. Quijano (2000, 2007) finds the genesis of modernity in the *colonization* of the Americas in the fifteenth century. Seeking to plunder the riches of the continents and to exploit the Indigenous peoples and African slaves, the invaders classified humans from superior to inferior, a strategy that enabled colonizers to “legitimately” abuse non-Europeans. The hierarchy of humans encompassed their biological features and cognitive capacities (privileging West European anatomies and ways of learning). For Quijano, the colonial classification of humans survived the independence of the Americas and still lives in what he calls *coloniality*: the preference to consider valid only what follows the modern European ways of knowledge creation (for more uses of the concept of coloniality in criminology, see Dimou, 2021; Franko, 2011).

Commentators use the concepts of the global North and global South to evaluate the contemporary consequences of colonization. Haug (2021) explains that these are “relational categories” that pay attention to “links between sites and across time, such as historically (post) imperial trajectories when interpreting the current contours of world politics.” In general, most countries enriched from colonial plundering are located in the global North and impoverished colonized countries in the global South (Franko & Goyes, 2019). Yet, the world is in constant flux with emerging powers that exert increasing influence in the political and economic realms (Bull, 2021). The concepts of *core* and *periphery* are useful for capturing the fluctuations in the global political economy: core countries have quasi-monopolies over financial and knowledge institutions, media and communication systems, technologies, and weapons of mass destruction (Amin, 1997); peripheral countries generate raw materials and supply an “unqualified” labor force, which core countries exploit (Wallerstein, 2004). Core countries have high incomes derived from their monopolies over financial institutions and can thus invest most in research and gain intellectual capital. Periphery countries have low incomes, little investment in R&D, and are locations of data mining and knowledge colonialism (Franko & Goyes, 2019).

We acknowledge that there are “peripheries” among core countries and “cores” in peripheral countries. Yet, the rule is that most scholars in core countries—which in most instances overlap with the global North—have more economic, infrastructural, and time resources than those in the periphery—which often overlap with the global South. Therefore, in this article, we refer, as a rhetorical device, to “poor researchers” as a designation for those who work in the periphery and those who work in core countries but are nonfunded or precariously employed. Our designation thus covers researchers in the periphery and peripheral researchers in the core.

Colonial-incepted modernity also continues to influence contemporary global knowledge creation. In the seventeenth century, European scholars designed a system to ensure that their work satisfied the mandates of modernity (rationalization, precision, efficiency). Holzner et al. (1985, p. 309) described that system as the “long range institutionalization of validity-enhancing intellectual activity.” They refer to the bodies in Western academia, which through a set of standard procedures decide which knowledge deserves the “valid” label (Holzner et al., 1985; Krugly-Smolkska, 1994; Wierzbicki, 2016). Originally, these bodies were European Royal Societies and currently are journals, peer-reviewers, and committees. Beyond validating “the truth,” the institutions that compose Western academia also act as circles of reward-

ing and disciplining “moral communities”: they teach how to behave when creating and substantiating knowledge (Holzner et al., 1985, p. 310; see also Goyes, 2018). When processing information, evaluators of knowledge use three main criteria to stamp knowledge as (in)valid: autonomy, neutrality, and the use of reliable (i.e., recognized and validated) methods (Goyes, 2016). While such a system of truth validation undoubtedly has benefits (it pushes thinkers to refine their arguments and makes the information we get more trustworthy (Goyes, 2018), the narrow criteria it uses negate the “valid” stamp to much useful information.

Furthermore, the ongoing changes in Western academia also create abysses between researchers working in the periphery and those working in core countries. The main shift we have in mind is that scholarly activity increasingly follows the script of capitalism, which seeks to constantly expand its production to increase profit (Stretesky et al., 2014). As Lund (2015, p. 12) states,

Capitalism involves a number of developments that put pressure on the arrangements that have previously served to counter the worst social consequences and effects of capitalism. This includes the expansion of economic logics and market exchange to domains that were not previously operating in accordance to such demands, including, among others, granting information and knowledge commodity-like status.

Connell (2019, p. 99) offers a similar point, together with an analysis of the logic of the perpetuation of academic capitalism:

[W]hat was formerly knowledge commons, held in trust by the academic community as a whole, is increasingly privatized as corporate-style managers gain control of universities. A cycle develops where the enterprise-university invests its money to gain prestige, and cashes in the prestige—via student fees, research grants, etc.—to gain more funds.

Capitalist logic in the academy implies that bigger, faster, and more is better—also when it comes to research methods. Dean (2017, p. 8) calls this transformation the “search for ever-larger data bases.” Meanwhile, the OECD considers that large research projects (in funding and time) are better than small ones. In a report, the OECD states that large pots of funding “encourage outstanding research by providing large-scale, long-term funding to designated research units” (OECD, 2014, p. 20). The ideal project, following capitalist logic, demands a lot of money and infrastructure. Individual scholars too consider costly quantitative methods the best way to create knowledge: “there’s no free lunch in research. Probability sampling is superior, but it’s also more intricate and often impractical” (Silvia, 2020, p. 41). Western academia, as the cognitive ruler at a global scale, creates a hierarchy of knowledge where *top knowledge* is what is produced in large, expensive projects. Five centuries of development of Western science, since the colonization of the Americas, have put “poor” researchers and nations in a difficult position to gain intellectual capital.

Researching from the periphery

Lemaitre and Sandvik (2015, p. 8) argue that “in violent contexts mobilization frames are unstable and constantly shifting, resources tend to vanish and political opportunities often imply considerable physical danger.” Their words, with a few changes, neatly describe the situation of many researchers in periphery countries: their work conditions are *unstable* due to national strikes, waves of violence, and short-term contracts. Resources are almost *nonexistent*; many pay from their pockets the costs of research, and their salaries are much lower than in the core (“Is science only for the rich?”, 2016). Fieldwork may represent physical danger. Research circumstances for social scientists may also be unstable in the periphery due to the lack of official statistics and data on violence and conflict or their unreliability (de Carvalho et al., 2020).

How can researchers working in peripheral countries prevent the widening of the global knowledge gap and the monopolization of intellectual capital by “rich” scholars? With the transformation of global structures that sustain disparities in research going at a snail’s pace, at best, or even backward, the reform depends on the researchers’ methodological imagination. Throughout our careers, we have researched in unstable, economically impoverished, and relatively violent contexts. Whereas our life trajectories are dissimilar—Goyes works mainly in the global South and Skilbri in the global North—our common approach to fieldwork serves as a starting point for exploring how researchers in peripheral countries can compensate for the lack of research funding. We rely on the autoethnographical (also called autobiographical) method to explore and learn from our experiences. Anderson (2006, p. 375) coined the term “analytic autoethnography” for the practice in which the researcher engages in self-observation while being “a full member in the research group or setting,” “visible as such a member in the researcher’s published texts,” and “committed to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of a broader social phenomena.” Although we have used our methodological imagination on several occasions, we illustrate our propositions with one approach to generate deep insights about society.

The taxi method

Davis (1959, p. 158), a member of the second Chicago School, applied the *taxi method* “over a six-month period in 1948 when [he] worked as a cabdriver for one of the larger taxicab firms.” Davis found that a taxi driver is deprived of minimal controls (he or she cannot choose the clients or the destination) and “acts as if he were merely an extension of the automobile he operates.” Nevertheless, Davis (1959, p. 160) also discovered that the taxi driver’s position in society “affords him a splendid vantage point from which to witness a rich variety of human schemes and entanglements” and makes him approachable “as someone to whom intimacies can be revealed and opinions forthrightly expressed with little fear of rebuttal, retaliation, or disparagement.” In other words, the *nonperson status* of taxi drivers affords them “glimpses of the private lives of individuals which few in our society, apart from psychiatrists and clergy, are privileged to note as often or in such great variety” (Davis, 1959, p. 160). Whereas

Davis was studying taxi drivers and their views on their clientele, his insights into the information cab drivers receive due to their specific position in society are of methodological interest to us. After Davies, others have continued to interview taxi drivers to understand their profession, but without focusing on the information they receive (Cassell & Bishop, 2019; Hoffmann, 2006; Toiskallio, 2000).

In our research, we have exploited the role of taxi drivers as “extensions” of the automobile they drive and the consequential access they get to the intimacies and views of their clientele. By doing so, we were applying the *taxi method*, a qualitative explorative technique that allows for methodological flexibility and transferability despite limited economic resources. In practice, the taxi method entails probing a topic via conversations with taxi drivers. Despite its simplicity, it can render a significant view for our understanding of a community (whether local, national, or global).

The justification for proposing the taxi method is that taxi drivers are “containers” of urban imaginaries. Silveira and Soares (2012) documented that Brazilian taxi drivers perform mapping work in the cities in which they operate due to their constant transit. The mapping taxi drivers conduct is as geographical as it is symbolic: their trips through the city and their interactions with passengers of all proveniences put them in contact with the “social imaginary.” Castoriadis (1998) was the original proponent of the *social imaginary* concept. He noted that humans do not directly perceive the “objective world”; instead, our perception is mediated by imagination. In other words, we mix imaginary elements, such as desires and goals, with more sensorial experiences of the world. The desires and goals we incorporate in our readings of the world are socially created, rather than individually. The product of the co-construction of perception, in which we mix fantasy with reality, is the *social imaginary* (how society imagines reality). Social imaginaries push the ways to “live a place and to interact with other subjects in the urban world” (Silveira & Soares, 2012, p. 154) and shape the thinking and acting of urban inhabitants. Therefore, taxi drivers, through their endless social and geographical trips around the city and beyond, receive widely shared—as well as some deviant—social representations from passengers from all social classes and backgrounds. While they are not hermetic containers and might willingly or unwillingly transform memories (Brainerd & Reyna, 2005), the narratives they possess can reveal “the aspirations, desires, daydreams, and in sum, the imaginary about the city” of both passengers and drivers (Silveira & Soares, 2012, p. 160).

Simultaneously, taxi drivers are also an important force shaping the cultural and physical dynamics of a city. While usually neglected by social studies, they

become indispensable to the city. Day after day, hour after hour, trip after trip, they connect the threads that weave together the urban territory, its daily activities, and its dwellers. Through their trajectories, the city is ceaselessly produced and held together, consolidated both as a concrete and an imagined entity: an economic and social machine. (Sopranzetti, 2018, p. 65)

By probing into the narratives of taxi drivers, researchers can obtain a representative overview of the various collective imaginaries within a city. Because these are *collec-*

tive imaginaries, exploration can produce transferable knowledge. We illustrate next, using two case studies, the applied results of the taxi method.

Researching narco-violence imaginations

Goyes experienced all three traits of research in periphery countries when conducting fieldwork on the effects of *Narcos* (a Netflix's show about the Colombian drug lord, Pablo Escobar) on the victims of the Medellín Cartel and Medellín's inhabitants (Goyes & Franko, 2021). Between March 2019 and November 2020, together with Franko, he observed sites of dark tourism and other locations connected to Pablo Escobar, collected and analyzed available official documentation, and interviewed individuals actively involved in collective memory construction (such as several producers working on *Narcos*), victims of the violence, and taxi drivers. Goyes himself covered the costs of the research, social unrest prevented him, on several occasions, from conducting fieldwork, and the demanding work as an associate professor at a Colombian university (20 hours of live lecturing weekly) implied limited research time. He experienced threats to his physical integrity.

Goyes began the project by interviewing 12 random taxi drivers. His intention, unarticulated at that moment, was to get insights into the topics that inhabitants and visitors of Medellín discuss regarding shows such as *Narcos*. Half of the drivers he approached, after receiving full information about the project, declined to participate. Some substantiated their rejection by explaining that Medellín had to “turn the page” and stop talking about the issue; for others, revisiting the memories associated with narco-violence was too painful. The 12 drivers who accepted talking gave him key insights about the phenomenon, which he would later confirm with larger amounts of data.

This method was vital in producing central findings of the project (Franko & Goyes, 2023): One of these was that Medellín's inhabitants who suffered narco-violence still have an ingrained trauma. In one of the products of the research, Goyes and Franko (2021, p. 9) wrote, “Considering the amount of violence that took place in Medellín, it is unsurprising that most interviewees who witnessed it express strong feelings of despair in connection to that period”. In the sampling interviews, drivers had this to say:

That was in the 1980s ... I studied, I was in the school ... so that [witnessing a bomb] leaves one a trauma, a distress, because one was just being and out of the blue BOOM ... one lived that, had friends who got killed with those bombs, and one is for ever marked.

Despite the trauma that still exists in Medellín's citizens, when entertainment corporations transform the memories of violence into a commodity, they authoritatively rewrite the history, neglecting the recollections of the direct witnesses. Taxi drivers directed Goyes' attention toward how the process of making tragic events into entertainment is not merely a way of profiting but also “imbuing violence with light and playful qualities” (Goyes & Franko, 2021, p. 13). Drivers explained:

I will tell you again, the youngster who did not witness that [the violence] have no idea of how things were, they are misled by the shows, and they want to re-live it.

I have always discussed with the passengers that there are many people, who are important and who are involved in that [narco-violence], and they [the producers] try to hide that because they just want to entertain.

Tourism is important to taxi drivers everywhere, but in this context, taxi drivers' everyday lives placed them in the middle of Medellín's transformation into a site of dark tourism. The taxi drivers spoke about how this dominated the conversations between themselves and the clients:

With the tourists I talk much about ... they ask a lot about Pablo Escobar, the Nápoles ranch [Escobar's luxurious farm], about his museum, the neighbourhood he built.

The tourists ask about touristic places, emblematic places, and obviously, about drug dealing, obviously they ask where they can find women, where they can find drugs, and where the nightclubs are.

I have driven foreigners who are interested in the narco-culture and they seek to use me as an intermediary to obtain women and drugs. They always ask: where can I find this? Or, can you deliver it to my hotel?

This also places taxi drivers close to how local youth are influenced by the narrative of the past produced by the show and attendant tourism. A taxi driver explained:

The youngsters see that [the narco-shows] ... believe they are guapos [slang for tough] and say "I will do what this man used to do"; and that is what the youngsters are doing now, and they get high and believe they are gods.

The findings of the project lead us to believe that the interviews with taxi drivers have a significant degree of abstraction and transferability. After the initial interviews with taxi drivers, Goyes and Franko, conducted many more interviews with victims of Escobar's cartel, authorities of Medellín, NGOs, and Narcos' producers, among others. Many of the dynamics that they identified as central in the interviews with taxi drivers were also salient when they accumulated and triangulated more data. We take that the publication of the project outputs at the *British Journal of Criminology*—the best journal in the category *social sciences*, subcategory *criminology, criminal law, and policing* according to the 2021 Google Scholar Metrics²—and with Oxford University Press attests to the fact that a small, unfunded project can overcome the requirements of Western science.

²https://scholar.google.com/citations?view_op=top_venues&hl=en&vq=soc_criminologycriminallaw-policing.

Assessing marginality in Russia

Skilbrei has, in a series of research projects, explored prostitution markets in a social context. Prostitution markets across contexts have considerable differences and overlaps, reflecting how the markets and actors involved are increasingly globalized (Crowhurst & Skilbrei, 2018). Within the prostitution market in each context, there is typically a quite marked difference between different strata, ranging from prostitution taking place outdoors either in city centers or in deserted parts of cities, to indoor venues where prices are higher and that typically offer “bounded authenticity” or a “Girlfriend Experience” (Bernstein, 2007). While stigma is typically attached to most commercial sex (Pheterson, 1986), not all strata of the market are subjected to the same disdain and are also not the target of punitive policies to the same degree. Street prostitution is not only something that individuals involved are stigmatized for, but is also something that local politicians, police, or others would prefer not to have associated with their cities. Stigmatization is a social process that affects people, brands, and locations associated with the discredited identity, in this case, that of “the prostitute,” a phenomenon Goffman (1986) termed “courtesy stigma.” This risk of “stigma by association” affects information about and access to local prostitution markets. Skilbrei has experienced this in her research.

While the existence of high-end indoor prostitution venues is something that state and nonstate stakeholders would be willing and able to talk about with a researcher, more marginalized actors and strata may be experienced as embarrassment to stakeholders or as something they have no or limited information about. While researching in various countries, Skilbrei has experienced what she suspects is a result of this as she has had problems getting concrete information on the most marginalized sectors of the prostitution market from stakeholders. In response, she has improvised a taxi method whereby she used local taxi drivers as a source of information, both about where to find local prostitution arenas and about dynamics in the market. Taxi drivers are a known part of the economy surrounding prostitution, in the sense that they drive prospective clients to where they can find sex workers and they drive sex workers to clients. Taxi drivers are sometimes also more directly part of the prostitution market, involved in the organization of and profiting from it (Rosen, 1982). Their key role in this exchange is acknowledged in many countries where information directed at sex workers or their clients is distributed via taxi drivers, e.g., in the case of governmental campaigns promoting safer sex in the sex industry and beyond (Govender, 2010; Morgan-Thomas & Overs, 1992).

Taxi drivers’ position as a bridge between prostitution markets and the rest of society makes it possible for sex workers to access clients that they under other circumstances would not be able to reach, and it also means that people looking to buy sex can find prostitution, also in cities they have just arrived in. Cohen (1980, p. xv) writes in his book on prostitution in New York: “I was also puzzled that, in this age of technology, despite the high cost of gasoline, an automobile was not used more often as an instrument of social research. An observer in a car can traverse large areas or distances in a short time and capture integrated ongoing social structures or patterns that would appear unrelated and fragmented to an observer on foot.” Being aware of this role, Skilbrei made use of taxi drivers’ know-how when wanting to access strata

of local prostitution markets other than exclusive hotel-based clubs during fieldwork in Murmansk in Northwest Russia in 2006. With Irina Polyakova, Skilbrei traveled with a commercial minivan service for Russians from the Norwegian border town of Kirkenes to Murmansk to explore traces of cross-border prostitution taking place in the region in the period after the dismantling of the Soviet Union. As part of the research, Polyakova and Skilbrei sought out local stakeholders for interviews about the phenomenon and diplomatic and police exchanges between local authorities on both sides of the border in managing this traffic. In addition, they visited hotel bars that had been important prostitution sites in the 1990s (and some also currently) and strip clubs in the city center but also in neighboring villages. They also wanted to know whether less organized forms of prostitution existed and whether there were parts of the market where Russian clients were more prominent than in the tourist-oriented clubs. In relation to taking a taxi, Polyakova and Skilbrei asked the driver whether there was street prostitution somewhere in the city. He drove them to the countryside outside Murmansk, where there was an area where Russian women worked. This prostitution arena was very different from what they had been told about and seen in the city itself, and knowledge about this marginalized and more local prostitution market helped them look behind the more glossy facades of city center clubs. They also talked with the taxi driver about what kind of clientele he typically took there and at what times of the week and day the traffic there was greatest. A central finding was that Russian clients were more important to local prostitution markets than various stakeholders professed during interviews, where they instead emphasized how prostitution in Northwest Russia stems from the welfare gap between Russian locals and Nordic tourists and business travelers. This version speaks to a popular social imaginary in the region where local and national causes of why prostitution exists are downplayed. This is understandably so in light of the stigma that Russians faced after the dismantling of the Soviet Union as a hotbed for prostitution, the “Nata-shas” “pouring” into Western Europe as borders opened (Jacobsen & Skilbrei, 2010; Sverdljuk, 2009).

That state and civil society stakeholders do not want researchers to know that prostitution exists or want to keep specific sections of it hidden is not uncommon. Skilbrei has also experienced governmental representatives and representatives from feminist civil society elsewhere downplaying the existence of prostitution or particular forms. While visiting Reykjavik, the capital of Iceland, she met with key parliamentarians and feminists but still had little access to information about where prostitution took place. A local taxi driver could, though, inform her colleague not only about where to find it but also that the market consisted mainly of sex workers who had migrated to Iceland from Thailand.

In the example from Murmansk, the taxi driver provides access to more hidden sites and is a source of information about what happens there. When only being guided by what state officials or others know about or want the researcher to see, the researcher easily only contributes to what is already represented as true about the phenomenon. Also, ideas about prostitution circulating in public debate and the academy may be hegemonic to the extent that access to other ideas and ideologies becomes difficult (Briggs, 2018). Taxi drivers can then, as mentioned above, offer a

counternarrative and serve as a bridge between the milieu the researcher is a part of and a social context that includes prostitution.

Uses, techniques, and limitations

Throughout this article, we have presented the taxi method under diverse denominations. All uses have a common pragmatical implementation: the researcher takes a random taxi and establishes a conversation with the driver. The commonalities in the application of the method are based on the significant similarities of taxi drivers worldwide, beginning by the kind of work they do and the way they are perceived by users, but also considering their socioeconomic positioning and the risks they face (Robbins et al., 2022) and the ways in which they approach their job and their clients (Gambetta & Hamill, 2005). Whereas the general approach to these uses is similar, each use has particularities. The type of conversation, the intensity of the questions, the route asked to take, and the value assigned to the responses vary depending on the use researchers want to give to the method. We explain their specificity from broader to narrower in terms of the research issue.

As a *technique to probe into a society's social imaginary*, the taxi method seeks to capture the universe of discourses existing in a community. Discourses are the master narratives that are “deeply embedded in a culture [and] provide a pattern for cultural life and social structure, and create a framework for communication about what people are expected to do in certain situations” (Halverson et al., 2011, p. 11). In this use, the conversation with the taxi driver should unfold as naturally as possible, allowing the person to reveal those broad topics that shape the regular conversations between taxi drivers and passengers. This use of the taxi approach to an ethnographic interview is described by Spradley (1979, in Flick, 2009, p. 169) as “friendly conversations into which the researcher slowly introduces new elements to assist informants to respond as informants.” While researchers can guide the conversation in a direction, they should not introduce specific questions to allow general elements of the social imaginary to appear. In their research, Goyes and Franko were interested in the extent to which *Narcos* affects the everyday life and imaginaries of Medellín's inhabitants. If Goyes had asked directly, he would have hindered the imaginaries from emerging naturally. Instead, he asked about the drivers' interactions with foreign visitors, and the responses about the interest in “narco tours” popped up automatically.

As a *sampling procedure*, the taxi method can help define where to allocate limited research resources. Sampling is about selecting data sources to pursue and entails questions such as what type of fieldwork to conduct, on which part of the data collected should researchers focus, and which elements of the data to use in writing (Flick, 2005). The taxi method cannot be used for statistical sampling as it demands knowledge about the totality of the universe (Adams & Lawrence, 2019), but its results are useful for theoretical sampling, “the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyses his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 45). As described above, researchers in the periphery have limited time and resources and cannot afford to conduct year-long research projects full time. Taxi drivers, as

receptors of knowledge from passengers from all social classes and backgrounds, can help the researcher pinpoint data sources on which to focus. One example is how Liv Finstad got the idea for her future research while working as a taxi driver in Oslo during the 1970s. Finstad observed the relationships and dynamics of Oslo's street prostitution market. Several years later, she undertook research into life in street prostitution together with Høigård, and together they published the book *Bakgater* in 1986 based on an extensive ethnography, later published in English as *Backstreets* in 1992 (Høigård & Finstad, 1992). This book is still a key reference in international scholarship on prostitution. While this example comes from a core country, it illustrates how the vantage point of a taxi driver can help spot the source worth pursuing. In Goyes and Franko's research, taxi drivers showed the researchers sites of dark tourism pilgrimage, which otherwise would have taken longer to identify—possibly through a long stay in the city and interviews with tourists. The approach to taxi drivers in this method goes close to expert interviews: “here the interviewees are of less interest as a (whole) person than their capacities as experts for a certain field of activity” (Flick, 2009, p. 165).

As a way of *creating geographic and symbolic cartographies of territories*, the taxi method approaches the taxi driver with a more defined issue and interrogates his geographical expertise. In the social sciences, cartography seeks to understand the social systems interacting in a community and the complexity of their interactions (Beteira, 2012). In Skilbrei and Polyakova's research, they approached taxi drivers with a clear issue (prostitution) and managed to uncover sex markets that are less known and are actively hidden by authorities. Geographical cartography allows mapping the location of sites of interest and understanding the political economy, explaining their position. Beyond uncovering locations of significance, the taxi method also allows for revealing the symbolic cartography of the location explored. The city and its buildings and streets become an archive of meaning. Restaurants, shops, houses, and bridges are not only part of the infrastructure but represent politics and memory that shape the life of a community (Herrera, 2022). Unearthing hidden locations of crime and harm also enables identifying complex social interactions and power relations. With their knowledge of the site, taxi drivers can also give cues about the symbolic meaning of geographical maps.

Finally, conversations with taxi drivers can also be a *data source*. Taxi drivers are first and foremost humans. They can not only give information about imaginaries, help shape the sampling, and provide information for geographical and symbolic cartography but also share their experiences and feelings. In Franko and Goyes' research, several taxi drivers were indirect victims (Walklate, 2007) of drug violence. They had lost friends and family, leaving in them an ingrained trauma. The taxi method is mainly interested in the other resources taxi drivers can offer the researcher, and its inclusion as a direct research participant is slightly more serendipitous. Once that happens, the researcher's approach changes slightly from an ethnographic or expert interview (Flick, 2009) to other forms of interviewing where the person as a whole is of interest and the researcher guides the conversation more directly (see, e.g., Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015; Skilbrei, 2019).

In all situations in which researchers turn to taxi drivers as a source of information and analysis, it is important to consider how this can be done without infringing on the

drivers' right not to be subjected to research without consent. Increasingly, researchers are subjected to demands to formalize access and document adherence to privacy laws and research ethics. This formalization follows from historical abuses, not least of minority populations (Brandt, 1978), but it is also something that affects the relationship between researcher and research participant, not least by how it inserts formality and emphasises differences between the two parties. To act ethically as a researcher is to perform research sensitive to context and in a way that ensures that the research participant does not feel exploited. Most ethical guidelines available for social research (NESH, 2021; Haugen & Skilbrei, 2021) and criminological research (Adorjan & Ricciardelly, 2023) are applicable to the taxi method.

Limitations exist for each method used in empirical research, and the taxi method described here is not an exception. Considering the demographics of taxi drivers—a profession in many places mainly taken up by male drivers from specific ethnic groups (Robbins et al., 2022)—the information obtained can be tainted by gendered and racialized views of matters. Furthermore, the taxi method might represent or be perceived as a risk by female researchers. We described above how certain methods could exclude women and queer researchers. Fileborn et al. (2022) shed light on the implications of taxis as sites of sexual harassment and violence for access to participation in diverse spheres of social life. Third, the taxi method is arguably more useful for the research of crimes and harms that are more visible and engage taxi drivers more often, such as drug trafficking, prostitution, and dark tourism. Other harms that happen in more private realms, such as domestic violence, or that are less visible, such as the crimes of the powerful or violence against the elderly, might be beyond the reach of the method.

The method also has limitations of accessibility. In some contexts, such as the one explored by Goyes, the taxi method is possible because taxis are affordable to most of the population. In other contexts, the taxi method provides valuable information because taxis operate at the nexus between rich and poor. The taxi driver thus becomes a figure that straddles socioeconomic divides and, as such, can share valuable information with the researcher about both social worlds. In both situations, the taxi method depends upon an “open” culture in the sense that taxi drivers access “thick descriptions” from passengers and others. However, in contexts where cultures are closed, drivers might not feel naturally sharing information with passengers. Furthermore, taking a taxi might be expensive in some locations (but that is commonly the case in core countries). Also, the widespread use of taxis is more an urban phenomenon than a rural one, and in rural locations, drivers might not be willing to share information with strangers due to the close links between all members of the population. Therefore, the taxi method might have significant shortcomings in its applications within rural criminology (Donnermeyer, 2016). Finally, taxi drivers may, of course, be privy only to sections of social dynamics and may hold stereotypical views on phenomena and people, so the researcher must reflect on what kind of places, people, and ideas this method facilitates access to. What taxi drivers say and what they show researchers may also be formed by expectations that they want to see something exotic or sensational. What is often difficult to attain for researchers with limited funds that make them unable to undertake lengthy fieldwork is knowledge about mundane everyday practices.

Paths to understanding

Despite its diverse limitations, the taxi method, in its different applications, is an affordable tool to create significant insights about society. Furthermore, while we endeavored to provide some detail about its application, we also used it here to highlight the value of the knowledge researchers can create using nonexpensive approaches. Even inexpensive methods can reveal profound truths about society. For example, in addition to interviewing taxi drivers, as in the case of Goyes, and using taxi drivers as a gatekeeper to milieus, the researcher would under other circumstances not find, as in the case of Skilbrei, taxi drivers, and taxi driving can contribute to generating research questions stemming from experiences that are often far removed from scholars. The taxi method is an example that signals that not only macro studies and big data can provide significant insights into society. In general, creative and affordable methods also make a significant contribution to understanding society. Fortin and Currie (2013) analyzed Canadian science-funding programs and showed that dollar-for-dollar, small-scale researchers published more papers and had higher citation rates than large grant holders did. Even modestly funded initiatives can have a measurable impact on research productivity.

Key to our argument is that there is a need to think about democratizing knowledge as something that goes beyond including scholars from the periphery in research projects as “data miners.” Part of the democratization of knowledge entails changing the imaginaries, according to which only macro projects with big data can generate incisive observations about society. Inexpensive methods can provide as significant insights as costly ones. By acknowledging the contributions of small, inexpensive projects, the international academic community can reconsider the “epistemological power” of scholars working in the periphery.

More than a decade ago, Christie (2009, p. 50, our translation) wrote that “[small] episodes like this may mean that one suddenly understands something new, or understands something old a bit better,” and while he accepted that “my way of understanding [society] is only one path,” he highlighted, “I like to be on the trails because I get closer to the events. It is like a bike compared to a car. One sees more from a bike. With a car, you go further. Maybe.” The ideas developed by Christie through the observation of small episodes continue to influence criminology deeply in the fields of prison studies, restorative justice, and victimology. He is considered one of the 50 most influential thinkers in the history of the discipline (Hayward et al., 2010).

The inequalities in knowledge production described at the outset of this article have two sources: unequal funding for research and the imaginary that only big projects generate valid insights. Both issues have roots in the colonial era. While we cannot, through a methods article, even propose a method to redress the issue, we can challenge the idea that inexpensive methods cannot be in equal standing with macro projects. The taxi method is but one example that seeks to initiate a conversation about the overall need for being methodologically creative and discussing ways of being so.

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Informed consent All participants gave their informed consent to their participation in the projects on which this article is based.

Statement regarding research involving human participants and/or animals Not applicable.

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