Gendered challenges to fieldwork in conflict-affected areas

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Two accounts from fieldwork.

It is 2005. I am on my first fieldwork in Liberia, leading a team of Norwegian and Liberian researchers completing both a survey and qualitative interviews of ex-combatants living in different areas in Monrovia. Given that this is my first real, independent research project, and only my second trip to the African continent – the other being a 2-day conference at a luxury hotel outside of Nairobi – I feel way out of my depth. Over the course of the fieldwork, previously undiscovered tensions erupt between myself and a Norwegian colleague.[1] He is senior to me, but it is my project. My idea. At a crucial juncture, towards the end of the trip, we argue over how to proceed. He wants us to return to our last field site for one final day of survey and interviews. I think we have enough material, and am concerned that the situation at that site is becoming volatile. I am convinced I am right, but I give in. He is senior and besides, I am tired of fighting. The next day, things go wrong. Too many people turn up, and they start arguing over the small rewards – biscuits and tins of sardines – that were given as compensation for informants' time. Some are just troublemakers asserting their authority, but we provided the arena for it. I am sick over the fracas that erupts around us, because of us. While there is no physical violence, the situation is tense. I fear for my safety, and for my team's, and for those informants who turned up in good faith. Tempers boil over, and not just among the ex-combatants. My colleague and I exchange heated words, and he walks off, leaving the site. It is hot, humid, loud. It is the end of fieldwork and I am exhausted. People are looking to me to fix this. I feel abandoned. Finally, I pull my other Norwegian colleague behind a car. She is an experienced nurse and good in a crisis. We confer. How will we placate a group of angry, disgruntled ex-combatants? My thoughts are going a mile a minute. I am convinced the project is ruined. I am convinced my career is over. I cry with frustration, anger, helplessness. My colleague covers me – literally. She shields me with her body. She knows, as I do, what it means to cry in this situation. A few minutes later, I pull myself together. We put out the fires. We placate. People disperse, annoyed but peaceful. We leave. I feel shame, embarrassment. A week later I am back in Oslo. A different colleague calls me in for a chat. He knows Liberia and knows the field and, as it happens, was in a different part of Liberia on a different project when all this went down. He is concerned and clearly uncomfortable. He asks what happened. He says he heard from our Liberian colleagues that there was an incident. They told him that I cried. He gently, but directly, tells me that I can never, ever again cry in public. At least not on fieldwork. Making a mistake is one thing, but crying over it is much worse. He tells me that I did a good job my first time out, but also that I might not regain the respect of my Liberian colleagues. He is not trying to be cruel. Such is the reality for a young woman, a crier. I am mortified. Not because of him. Because of myself.

Liberia again. 2007. A new project. This time I focus on the peacekeepers, not on the ex-combatants. This is how I have learned from past mistakes. Among the peacekeepers, I feel more in control. I am

[1] People familiar with my work might assume they know the identity of the colleague that I argued with, based on patterns of co-authorship and shared thematic and geographical interests. It is not that person.

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working the project with a colleague, the nurse from before. We work well together. But this project – on how peacekeepers experience the UN's zero-tolerance policy against sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) – is not really her field, so she mostly defers to me. I organize access to the UN mission, UNMIL, using contacts in the gender office. It is amazing access. We get passes that allow us to come and go freely on the premises, unaccompanied, and to use UN transportation throughout the entirety of our stay. But – the gender office. It didn't occur to me that this might be an issue until we are in the office of a senior staff officer, a colonel, from a European country. I am counting on this colonel to facilitate other interviews with harder-to-access contingent personnel and commanders, and ultimately with the force commander. And this colonel does not like the gender office. There have been some conflicts in the past. As soon as we sit down, I know we are in trouble. He is hostile, impatient, openly suspicious of our motives. At one point, his junior officer, who overhears the exchanges through the open door, comes in and nervously asks if this is on the record. I feel my desperation rising. So I ask if we can take a step back, and turn to a tactic that I used with success in Haiti a month earlier, on fieldwork connected to the same project. I play the military card.[2] Look, I say, I understand that you are wary. You think I am hostile to the military, and that I will make you look bad no matter what you say or do. But I am not hostile to the military – I am a product of it! I reference my military grandfather, father, my brother on active service. I shamelessly name-drop the military bases I spent my early childhood on, knowing that he would recognize them as US Marine bases, and that the Marines carry a particular cachet (among military types) even beyond US borders. I note how the almost exclusive focus on military peacekeepers in terms of SEA obscures the modalities and extent of the abuse carried out by civilian and police peacekeepers, and by other non-UN international personnel. Suddenly the atmosphere in the room changes. He relaxes, his hostility evaporates. His natural gregariousness appears, and now he wants to impress us. He is positively – in the sense of harmlessly, non-physically, non-aggressively – flirtatious. Two young white women asking him questions, listening to him talk, soliciting his knowledge and experiences. A nice change of pace from normal mission life. Two hours fly by before the junior officer reappears to remind him of another appointment. Leaving, I am forcefully struck by the knowledge – also evident under the surface in Haiti, but unadmitted to myself until this moment – that being a young (white, hetero, global North) woman in the field is not only a liability, as I convinced myself after my first trip to Liberia. Maybe it is an advantage. We get our interviews.

Postscript: Five years later, I am in Kinshasa conducting my PhD research.[3] Sitting alone in the courtyard café in one of the UN mission compounds, I overhear three staff officers talking at the next table. Recognizing that they come from the same country as my colonel, I strike up a conversation, asking if they know him (by then, a general). They do. I fill them in on what my current research is about, and they ask what they can do to help. More doors are opened. On its face, this does not seem to have anything to do with my being a (still, then) young, white woman. Except that the entire outdoor seating area was empty, except for me, when they arrived, yet they ended up at the table directly abutting mine. One does wonder.

[2] In Haiti I enjoyed a similar level of access to the mission, MINUSTAH, but there it was organized through the office of the force commander. This ensured cooperation from military personnel throughout the organization, and also had a great deal of pull with most civilian personnel. My playing the military card in Haiti was less about gaining physical access, then about convincing my military sources that I was a competent and trustworthy interlocutor with some degree of understanding about their lives – that is, someone they could speak openly and honestly with.

[3] See Jennings (2020) drawing on this fieldwork on empathetic engagement with vulnerable sources.

These two anecdotes bring a number of issues to the fore. Some of these issues are directly related to gender and, more specifically, to the experience of being a woman doing fieldwork in conflict-affected locales; others are more generally applicable. Many of these points may seem obvious or inevitable; in any case, they go largely unacknowledged in (most) methodology sections. Yet they are hugely important in how determining what, and who, we gain access to, and accordingly the claims we can make.

Point one: we are treated differently by virtue of who we are. And we treat others differently by virtue of who they are.

As a feminist researcher who is conversant with, if continuously challenged by, the ideas of positionality, reflexivity, and intersectionality, it is both necessary and natural to observe how our work is affected by who we are. By 'who we are', I mean what we communicate to those around us: our identity markers, experiences – specifically, what we choose to share, and to what ends – personal attributes, and affiliations. In this sense, 'who we are' is distinct from 'what we do', but most methodology discussions are confined to the latter. In this section, I discuss the former.

Feminist scholarship is not just about critical theories and perspectives; it is also about how research is done and how power operates in the act of accessing, analyzing and presenting material (Ackerly, Stern and True, 2006). This also entails personal reflection. The late Lee Ann Fujii writes eloquently of her experiences as a mixed-race North American woman doing fieldwork in Bosnia, Rwanda, Croatia, the United States, and Belgium. In developing the concept of accidental ethnography, she discusses how her identity markers and professional qualifications – specifically, her language skills – mean different things in different locales, both within and across her case countries (Fujii 2015: 529-531). For example, in Rwanda she is 'typed' by many locals as part Rwandan, according to varying criteria – her facial features, her spoken Kinyarwanda, her very presence in a particular locale – with her dark skin being the common feature that enables this typing. The same features that mark her as 'familiar' in Rwanda mark her as 'foreign' in Bosnia, but her ability to converse in Bosnian, even if haltingly, results in a noticeable difference in how she is treated by Bosnians compared to other foreigners. Fujii's purpose in relating these anecdotes is that, 'Observing how others type us can reveal a great deal about the various clues and criteria that people use to categorize others in general (Fujii, 2015, p.529)', and further that 'physical features are not objective signs, but that people read faces, bodies, and body language according to local categories and meanings (*Ibid*., 531)'. In other words, awareness as to how others 'read' and type us makes us better ethnographers, giving us another tool with which to analyze our material. Critical reflection on how others judge/ interact with/ dismiss/ elevate you as a person thus makes for better research.

While Fujii examines how the meanings of our experiences and identity markers change over space, Cohn (2006) shows how these change and acquire further meanings over time. She interestingly relates how her subject position (the 'I' doing the interviews) changed in both subtle and significant ways in the course of two extended research projects focusing on civilian defense intellectuals and military officers, respectively, and the effect that this had on her interaction with her informants. The effect of time on 'the "I" doing the interviews' is something I did not properly appreciate in the course of the 2005 and 2007 fieldworks, but that became more obvious in later fieldworks – particularly those conducted after the birth of my first daughter in 2009. Becoming a mother added a new dimension to my identity. By this, I do not refer to the idealized traits associated with motherhood – nurturing, self-sacrificing, and the like. But like Cohn, I found that motherhood helped normalize me to certain informants, especially military personnel and, often, local informants.

Among military personnel, while I still played the military card as my main means of establishing contact and building trust, it was striking how my status as a mother worked almost to defang me and put informants at ease, among both male and female personnel. A similar effect was observable among local informants, where, at least in my field sites, motherhood also endows a sense of adulthood (from girl to woman) and respect. If nothing else, parenthood provided grease to the conversational wheels and a point of commonality with many of my informants. Thus, even while, as a feminist researcher, I am critical of the idealization of motherhood and the particular forms of femininity associated with it, I cannot deny that I benefited from these tropes, insofar as they worked in informants' minds to make me a less intimidating, mystifying presence. As Cohn and Fujii argue, therefore, these experiences illustrate the contingent nature of knowledge, and how a researcher's access to information is predicated at least in part by the markers people use in deciding who they trust.

But these encounters are not just revealing about our informants, our 'subjects'; they also reflect back upon ourselves, our position(s) in the field, the choices we make, and the way we understand and construct arguments on the basis of our fieldwork experiences. To illustrate this, I return to the accounts above. How did my identity markers, my competence, my background, and experiences (as necessarily conveyed by me) impact my material and my work?

In Liberia in 2005, my research team from a Norwegian institution worked together with a team of Liberian colleagues affiliated with a Liberian institution. At the field sites – picked in a cooperative process between the Norwegian and Liberian teams – our Liberian colleagues worked primarily on data collection for the survey component, but they also had an important informal intermediary role between the global North researchers and the ex-combatants. By virtue of their very presence, they vouched for us; but through their actions and verbal and non-verbal communication, our Liberian colleagues could also signal their disagreement or distance. This is an understandable – indeed, necessary – strategy on the part of local colleagues. But while I knew this was the case (and why), I did not *understand*, at least at the beginning, the importance of the implicit, unarticulated meanings circulating in the field site between the various participants.[4] What I did realize straightaway, conversely, was that the most senior Liberian colleague did not recognize my authority as project leader, instead relating always to my older, male Norwegian colleague; and that this behavior was copied by his subordinates, both in team meetings and at the field sites. These in-team power relations were something I experienced as annoying and belittling, but they did not seem to affect our contact with ex-combatants at our first field site, where we experienced a good reception from the neighbors and immediate community. Moreover, as I focused particularly on conducting in-depth qualitative interviews with a smaller number of informants, I was able to establish a degree of independent contact with ex-combatants that (I convinced myself) overcame the signals they might have been picking up from the other team members, who concentrated on the survey component.

However, at the second field site – which was actually a series of sites clustered in proximity to each other, as we could not get permission to use the same place every day – the frictional dynamic within the team became, for various reasons, more pronounced, to the extent that it complicated my relationship with our ex-combatant informants. Partly because of this, and partly because we changed location everyday – thus making it difficult to follow up individual interviewees to the same degree as at the first site, where many made it a habit to drop by every day to chat – I struggled to achieve the same degree of contact and trust with my interviewees.

[4] On using research brokers in conflict-affected areas, see Käihkö (2019); Utas (2019).

On the other hand, the more challenging circumstances of the second site forced me to be more attuned to the power dynamics playing out through and around me – not just within the research team, but between team members and ex-combatants, and among ex-combatants themselves. When the machinery of fieldwork functioned well, my attention had been subsumed by my informants. Once I had to involve myself more actively in the management of the field site, I became more aware of the interplay – sometimes subtle, sometimes not – between the various actors present, including how the ex-combatants that came to the site situated themselves vis-à-vis each other, the immediate community, and the UNMIL forces patrolling the area. Moreover, because many ex-combatants used each day's site as a hangout for the day, I was often able to initiate discussions with different groups that turned into quasi-focus groups.[5] Some of these group discussions turned out to open up new lines of enquiry, and all were valuable in providing a glimpse into the interaction among ex-combatants. In particular, the dynamics at the second site gave me greater insight into how ex-combatants navigated and played to their advantage the system set up by others, something that became central to my analysis of how the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programme worked in Liberia.

These insights and dynamics did not all unfold because of 'who I am'. But the intra-team power relations assumed the form they did in part because of who I am; and these power dynamics in turn affected how I, and the rest of the team, did our work and how our informants related to us. This firsthand experience of the contingency of knowledge contributed to a more nuanced and considered analysis.

'Who I am' played out differently in my 2007 fieldworks on the SEA project. But it was not necessarily that my physical identity markers took on radically different meanings for my UN informants than they had for the ex-combatants. Instead, because my background and experiences were closer to UN peacekeepers' (both military and civilian), this enabled me to establish a connection with them that was markedly different from how I could relate to the ex-combatants. As noted earlier, among UN military peacekeepers, my personal background as relates to the military would often come up. I either brought it up myself, in order to establish commonality or build trust with the peacekeepers; or it came up organically in response to the informant's surprise at my familiarity with military ranks and terminology.[6] These performances were for the most part, spontaneous; or at least, they were not the product of a deliberate strategy developed in advance of my fieldwork. But it is not lost on me that – similar to how I have also benefited from the idealized tropes of motherhood that I normally abhor – the tactic I used in interviews and conversations with military personnel can be seen as essentially 'de-feminizing' myself in order to fit in with 'the boys' by establishing a sense of camaraderie based on (albeit limited) shared experience. Indeed, playing the military card might have been even more effective precisely because it seemed to cut against what some of my other identity markers – small, physically unthreatening, straight woman, working on gender issues – seemed to signal.

Conversely, with civilian UN staff, particularly those in professional categories, I would instead tend to hew to the terminology and credentials acquired in previous years working in the Washington, DC (and more sporadically, New York) policy world, and on earlier research projects on UN missions. This

[5] Many ex-combatants at the first site also used the site as a hangout and gathering place during the extent of our fieldwork there. Because I was so focused on conducting individual interviews, I did not initiate focus group discussions in that site, although I did have many informal discussions with small groups of ex-combatants during breaks.

[6] See also Higate (2007, 103-104) for a discussion of how a male ex-military researcher used his military background and experience in a research project on SEA and masculinities.

helped me establish credibility and provided a common language with these informants, and often imbued the interviews with a tone of both informality and equality. Among local sources, conversely, I was more willing to profess my own confusion or ignorance when it cropped up, even occasionally 'playing dumb' in order to get a fuller back-story and more information from sources. This willingness to embrace my own ignorance in interactions with local sources was not something I dared do in the 2005 fieldwork, where I mistakenly thought that asking for help would signal weakness. But the more relaxed, ordered environment of the 2007 fieldworks – where most of my interviews with sources occurred in an office setting, where I experienced a greater degree of comfort and control (see next point) – gave me the confidence and license to play on my femininity in this way. I write 'play on my femininity' because playing dumb hinges on a specific type of privileged (raced, aged, straight) femininity. Thus, while taking care to play down my femininity in some ways – by dressing and behaving more conservatively than in my normal life – I was also attuned to how aspects of my femininity could be played up in my interaction with different sources. This awareness in turn informed my subsequent analysis, not least concerning women peacekeepers' experiences in-mission and how they relate to SEA.

Yet all this reflection about how sources, locals, and others in the field experience us should not obscure that this works both ways. It is both less comfortable and, in my experience, less discussed to admit that our work is also affected by how we treat others, and that this in turn is mediated by who *they* are. For example, my first encounters with ex-combatants were shadowed by my own nervousness and fear, stemming from what I knew of the horrors of Liberia's civil war, and exacerbated by the concern of family and friends regarding the (perceived) danger I was exposing myself to – all of this intrinsically entangled with raced, gendered, and classed tropes and stereotypes of African men (and ex-combatants specifically). My comfort level around ex-combatants quickly grew, but that does not negate this shame-inducing reality.

Of course we should strive to treat everyone equally and with respect, fairness, and kindness. But we should also recognize and acknowledge how our own preconceptions and expectations – and sometimes prejudices, biases, and fears – play into our experiences, performances, and analysis. I cannot pretend that my first fieldwork experience was not marked by fear. Similarly, I cannot truthfully maintain that I approached ex-combatant informants in exactly the same way that I later approached UN informants. I do not think that this admission discredits my work on ex-combatants and DDR, but I put it forth here to acknowledge it as another way in which I fail to live up to my principles – just as when I disappoint my feminist convictions by playing on my femininity and tropes of motherhood in relation to/with sources. These self-interrogations are not comfortable, but they are analytically and personally valuable (see also Eriksson Baaz, Gray, and Stern, 2018). Acknowledging that my reaction to people and events in the field is highly situational, occasionally opportunistic, and not always in line with my own ideals has made me both a more empathetic and more critical researcher.

Thus, as researchers we should always strive to situate ourselves and our material in relation to the larger context, acknowledging that our knowledge and claims are always and necessarily partial, mediated, subjective, and temporal. Given this reality, my own efforts to create responsible, analytically sound research entails being open about the limits of my material, what I can and cannot claim, and where these claims are coming from. The 'scientific' way to do this is to cloak these considerations in the language of scope conditions and generalizability, in the process sometimes ghosting yourself from your own text. While I recognize that this is often a necessary tradeoff for getting work published, I hope that we as researchers push our respective disciplines towards more openness in discussing the importance of contingency in our production of knowledge.

Point two: your physical comfort and emotional well-being are more important than you let on

Both the sheer physicality and the emotional labor and fallout of fieldwork are rarely problematized, but they are central to our experiences of fieldwork and colour – if unconsciously – our analysis. Some of the ways this plays out are obvious. People with disabilities or living with chronic illness will face challenges beyond the general hardships posed by fieldwork in conflict-affected locales. Researchers with conditions that limit mobility will likely find access to be especially problematic: transportation infrastructure and many buildings will simply not be accessible. Availability of decent medical care is also a concern. While this is true for anyone, it is a particularly important consideration for people managing illness, including mental health conditions, as well as for pregnant researchers. People with dietary restrictions, including not just allergies or intolerance but also vegetarianism or veganism, can also find life difficult, especially in rural areas.[7] None of this should be read as implying that researchers with disabilities or health issues cannot do fieldwork. It is simply to acknowledge the extra level of difficulty that they face.

But there are other, less obvious ways that our physical and emotional comfort influence our fieldwork and, by extension, the analysis that stems from it. My two accounts from Liberia are illustrative. The 2005 fieldwork was both physically and emotionally challenging. Our workload was intense, meaning that I slept much less than usual over a prolonged period. The experiences ex-combatants related to us, both from the conflict and from their current situation, were upsetting. Our days, from early morning until sundown, were spent entirely at our various sites, meaning that no breaks or down-time were built into the day. Staying at the sites all day also meant that we were dependent on whatever food we could find nearby, and were similarly dependent on negotiating access to toilet facilities. This added a level of anxiety and discomfort. Finally, I had no reserves of experience to draw on, something that made me feel insecure and emotionally unequipped – a feeling intensified by the interpersonal conflicts on our team, and by my confused status as a both a project leader and a junior researcher. These issues do not excuse the situation that unfolded at the end of fieldwork, but it is also true that my reaction to that situation was affected by accumulated physical and emotional exhaustion.

Conversely, while the 2007 fieldwork was also long and challenging, it was much more manageable – in part because I learned from my earlier experience. As previously noted, my decision to examine SEA through the lens of peacekeepers rather than victims was deliberate, informed by greater awareness of my strengths and weaknesses as a fieldworker and researcher. My emotional involvement in my informants was more detached, something I can only attribute to the fact that they were not suffering as the ex-combatants had been. While my colleague and I spent a good deal of our time at the main mission compound at Pan African Plaza, we were not stuck there. Being at PAP was like being in an office anywhere: quiet, air-conditioned, clean, with good toilet facilities and a canteen and café for breaks between meetings. I was conscientious about building down time into our schedule, and in getting enough sleep. Monrovia itself felt safer than it had two years earlier: I realized in 2007 just how stressed the security situation made me feel in 2005, a realization I could only make when it was no longer the case. I also felt more confident of myself as a researcher and project leader. These factors all made the 2007 fieldwork easier and more productive. The fact that I eventually built on the 2007 project in my PhD work, while I never again did any further field research on the 2005 project, is hardly coincidental.

[7] This is obviously context-specific.

Issues of physical and emotional comfort are universal, but they are also gendered and raced. The example above of access to toilet facilities is one that affects men and women differently, and one that can create discomfort, embarrassment, insecurity, and – not least – health complications. Encountering sexism, racism, and other forms of discrimination or harassment in the course of one's fieldwork affects researchers' emotional health and comfort, and their perception of (in)security and vulnerability. While many researchers seem to think that anything short of physical violence does not count as a difficult or traumatizing field experience, it is important to acknowledge the many stresses and challenges that fieldwork can entail, and the effects these can have on researchers' wellbeing. In this respect, it is crucial – and often, unfortunately, neglected – that home institutions have in place routines to follow up researchers returning from fieldwork, including (minimally) debrief sessions with the researcher's supervisor and immediate colleagues, but encompassing also free access to mental health services and other necessary follow-up care. Supervisors and colleagues need to develop a culture of checking in on researchers who have returned from fieldwork in conflict-affected areas, even if the researcher seems to be functioning fine. This is equally true for male as for female researchers, as men may be even less likely to ask for help when they are struggling.

As with the previous point, the issues raised here can be difficult to write into our texts. In fact, reflecting on the importance to our field experience of 'comfort' – a feminized word that, to many, evokes softness, luxury, and entitlement – may make researchers even more vulnerable in the review process, where some unsympathetic reviewers will seize on any admitted weaknesses in order to discredit the author and the work. But this point is important to bring up for two reasons. The first is to highlight the importance of physical and emotional comfort and health in fieldwork, so that researchers – especially those with less field experience – can (insofar as possible) plan for how to mitigate challenges that can reasonably be anticipated, such as those related to known health conditions. This is necessarily an individual process, but something that should also be discussed among the project team before fieldwork. The second reason is to remind the reader that we all have challenges and limitations. These limitations cannot always be planned for or around, nor do they suddenly disappear when we go to the field. In fact, they may be intensified. Recognizing this will hopefully help researchers be more kind and forgiving to themselves and their colleagues.

Point three: No one has a perfect fieldwork.

Sometimes things go wrong through no fault of your own. But sometimes it is your fault. Sometimes you misjudge the situation, or exacerbate an existing conflict, or wrongly assume that you will have access to the things you need, or take shortcuts, or behave inappropriately in your pursuit of the data, the interview, the elusive 'it' that will make your work stand out. And in either case – whether you feel yourself to blame or not – sometimes you do not react the way you want to or should. In 2007 with the colonel, I was able to read the room, shift tactics, and salvage the interview at no cost to our integrity or project. In 2005, I made a bad situation worse by letting it spiral while I wasted time and energy fighting with a colleague, then letting my own doubts and fears overwhelm me. Even more than the initial mistakes, it is my failings in responding these mistakes that have stayed with me the most. Up to a certain point, this is both fine and necessary: in such a relational activity as fieldwork, it is irresponsible, if not unethical, not to reflect on and learn from ones' mistakes. The problem occurs when reflecting on, and learning from, errors tips over into obsessing and being paralyzed by them. Speaking from experience, this is self-defeating to your work, professional development, and health and wellbeing. In my case, it grew out of the conviction that my fieldwork was grossly insufficient compared to everyone else's. But this is ridiculous. No one has a perfect fieldwork.

Given, then, that we all make mistakes and that no fieldwork is – or can be – flawless, there are two takeaways. First, and most importantly, is to always keep sight of your ethical and moral obligations in conducting fieldwork. This is not always as easy as it sounds, as many of the ethical issues that crop up during fieldwork are not of the black-or-white variety, or even necessarily obvious at the time. There is usually a tradeoff involved, and this tradeoff is even harder to make without a considered understanding of your obligations as a researcher. Because as seen in the episode from the 2005 fieldwork, it is easy to let yourself be overtaken by events. If I had insisted that we would not make a final visit to our last field site – if I had listened to my own instincts instead of going along with the plan so as to avoid more intra-team conflict – then the irresponsible and ethically troubling episode could have been avoided. At the time, I lacked the experience, confidence, and (*de facto*) authority to make the right call. Thinking more deliberately beforehand about fieldworkers' ethical obligations and challenges would not have changed those facts, but it could have made it more reflexive to make the right call.

The second takeaway is to accept, and make the most of, the material you do get, in a way that is responsible, conscientious, and analytically sound. Post-fieldwork, our ethical obligations may change form, but they do not evaporate. They may not be as immediate or embodied, but they are crucial nonetheless. The obligations I am referring to here are those we have to scholarship. Obviously we cannot falsify or make up data. But beyond this basic principle, we must avoid the temptation to push our arguments beyond what our material can take; to 'prettify' or whitewash our data; or to remove ourselves from the picture entirely, bestowing upon our material – always obtained relationally and contextually – a surfeit of objectivity and impartiality that is disingenuous. This does not mean that we must always write ourselves into our texts. But it does mean that, as we think through our data and construct our analysis, we must always consider how our behavior, our actions, our status, and our behaviour – but also our identities and our physicality – affect what we gain access to, and the ramifications this has for the arguments we make.

Final thoughts

The points above were learned the hard way, through experience and over time. Anyone who has done fieldwork in conflict-affected locales will have their own lessons-learned. All the preparation in the world will not fully prepare you for fieldwork. That said, there are some things that I know now that I wish I knew then, as it would have equipped me better for fieldwork's challenges – and joys.

Push your comfort zone – but know your limits

Fieldwork is intense, and in many ways constitutes a sort of state of exception to a researcher's normal life. It is intellectually, emotionally, and often physically challenging and stimulating. It is exciting and, occasionally, alienating and lonely. Anyone preparing to do fieldwork in a conflict-affected locale needs to be willing to step outside of their comfort zone. If you cannot or will not do this, then you should rethink your project. This is the kindest thing you can do for yourself. If you find yourself dreading and fearing your fieldwork, then that is a warning sign that should be taken seriously.

But pushing your comfort zone does not mean abandoning it altogether – and just because you are in the field does not mean your limits disappear or radically change. Because fieldwork is time-limited, there is a strong incentive to ignore the signals your body gives you. Physical and emotional overload and exhaustion are seen as obstacles to push through in order to maximize your time in the field. This is self-defeating and potentially harmful. Yes, push yourself – but do not make yourself a martyr.

And try to keep some sense of perspective. While the bad interview or messed-up itinerary may seem critical at the time, it rarely is as important to your overall project as you think.

In connection with knowing your limits, consider also the costs of your performances in the field – analytically, but also in terms of yourself. Especially with qualitative or ethnographic fieldwork, you are not just taking (knowledge, experiences, stories) from others, you are also giving. What are you giving of yourself, and why? This does not mean you have to have a deliberate strategy; indeed, such a strategy can backfire if it comes off as inauthentic. But I wish I had been more conscientious about how my professional and personal selves imbricate – as they do with almost all researchers – and where the professional compromises or complicates the personal. While I do not have any concrete examples of boundaries crossed from my fieldwork, looking back I realize that I was putting a lot of myself on the line. This is, perhaps, only fair when we ask our informants to do the same. But while this way of working often enabled me to connect to people and establish trust, it also could leave me feeling wrung out and exposed. I wish I had been less naïve in thinking that the only relevant identity I took with me into the field was that of researcher. If I had thought more beforehand about my boundaries and limits and how these could affect the data I expected and wanted to get in the field, and about the tradeoffs I was willing to make, then I would have been better prepared for the totality and all-consuming nature of fieldwork.

Get out of your own head

This advice seems to run counter to the points above about how your actions, your person, and your comfort affect and mediate your fieldwork experience and knowledge production. But it comes back to the need to keep some kind of perspective. Being self-aware is an important component of doing fieldwork. But try not to assume that your perception of yourself, including how you should behave, react, and what you should be capable of, is shared by others. Do not let these perceptions control, hamper, or cripple you. Being open and attentive means that sometimes you have to get out of your own head.

It also means that sometimes you just have to let things roll and see what happens. This is hard for me, since I find it hard to relinquish control. And sometimes just letting things happen ends up taking you down the wrong path. But a rich fieldwork experience is not just about checking off interviews or getting all your questionnaires filled out. It is also about the spontaneous, the unexpected, the weird, and the chancy. Yes, you probably should have some sort of overarching plan or structure for your fieldwork; survey work in particular depends on it. But do not underestimate the value of sometimes just letting go.

Embrace the selfishness of fieldwork

Fieldwork is inherently selfish. You are taking time away from family and friends, abandoning your everyday responsibilities, and spending lots of someone else's money to go and devote yourself to a project that you find interesting. You are also extracting valuable time and knowledge from your sources. You are not doing this because it is forced upon you. You are doing this (hopefully) because you want to.

How I wish that I had embraced the selfishness of fieldwork! And now as a mother of two, how I wish that I had been even more selfish back when I had no double shift, no imperative to cut even shorter a fieldwork that is already too packed, no guilt, no tearful skype calls with a distraught child. Because the reality is that, for most of us, fieldwork is a luxury that does not last. Teaching loads, professional pressures, caregiving responsibilities (especially for single parents, but also a challenge in dual-career households), precarious positions, ever-diminishing research funding – all affect our ability to

conduct fieldwork, and for how long. And generally speaking, because women still assume a disproportionate share of caregiving and domestic responsibilities, as well as service work in their professional capacity, the effect on fieldwork is more acute for women then men. If I had known then what I know now – that doing fieldwork was a phase in my research life, one that became exponentially more difficult after one child and (for me) unmanageable after two, but one that I will hopefully return to in time – then I would have appreciated the experience even more.

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