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Getting Prepared to Be Prepared: How Interpersonal Skills Aid Fieldwork in Challenging Contexts

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Abstract This article deals with fieldwork in challenging research contexts that make preparation for field research particularly difficult. Challenging contexts include generally insecure places, politicized contexts, and unknown settings. Drawing on our experience in the field, we discuss four challenges that are common across these contexts: access, positionality, researcher well-being, and research design and data collection. Bringing together insights from fieldwork with urban elites and in the countryside, this paper describes problems that occurred in both settings and identifies a set of interpersonal skills that helped the authors to tackle the challenges of the field and seize the opportunities it offered. This article posits that recognizing the importance of certain interpersonal skills, namely: openness, empathy, humility, and flexibility, precedes the identification of practical tools. Interpersonal skills, instead, focus on a general attitude that underlies researchers' capacity to make informed choices about specific courses of actions, preparing fieldworkers to be prepared to confront problems once they arise.

Keywords Fieldwork; Research Strategy; Challenging Contexts; Qualitative Research

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Trapped in a town center as an angry crowd cuts power and telephone lines. Being sexualized and harassed by key informants. Being denied access by high-ranked technocrats. These are only a few of the most difficult challenges in doing fieldwork that the recent literature on qualitative methods addresses (see, in this order: Nilan 2002; Mügge 2013). Recent years have seen a growing openness by academics to discuss the seemingly “unscientific” aspects of social enquiry. These elements of the investigation process are rarely discussed in publications and final stages of research trajectories. However, there is now a considerable number of articles, including previous issues of this journal, that address the specific challenges of conducting research under dangerous circumstances (Wong 2015), in politically unstable rural environments (Mukeredzi 2012) and on sensitive issues (Roman 2016). Various journals have added to the literature with round table discussions (Ortbals and Rincker 2009) and special issues (Goode and Ahram 2016). In addition, several book-length discussions are available to help the social researcher “survive field research” (Sriram et al. 2009; see also Thomson, Ansoms, and Murison 2012; Lunn 2014; Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read 2015). Do we need yet another report on the challenges and lessons learned from fieldwork?

We believe the answer is yes. Graduate students who set off to the field for the first time are still often ill-equipped to confront the realities of fieldwork. As a political scientist who found herself forced to bribe the Russian police wrote, the best recommendations she counted on at the time were only some “helpful hints regarding the problems one might find in the field and some preliminary thoughts on how to

handle certain situations” (Johnson 2009:321). Since then, the field has made some progress, but nevertheless, we still lack some of the cross-cutting insights that can prepare us to face the difficult tasks of doing research in challenging contexts.

Specifically, this article hopes to make three contributions. First, we conceptualize challenging research contexts more broadly than prior contributions that address fieldwork in areas of ongoing or recent armed conflict (Goodhand 2000; Barakat et al. 2002; Wood 2006). Challenging contexts include not only dangerous places where political violence is acute, but also localities where researcher mobility is restricted by other variables, such as high crime rates, for instance. Challenging contexts are also present where access is difficult in logistical terms, and they include situations of extreme political polarization. Lastly, fieldwork in any unknown or unfamiliar place also creates a particularly challenging context. Although, in our case, we encountered the “unknown” doing research in the global south, this contribution is equally relevant for those conducting fieldwork in developed countries, provided that the particular context is unfamiliar to the researcher. The bigger the cultural, linguistic, and life-world gap between the researcher and the research environment, the more of the precious resource time is needed until the researcher is able to get the most out of fieldwork. After all, our objective in the field is not merely to survive (Sriram et al. 2009), but to gain the original insights one can only obtain in the field.

The second contribution lies with the combined experiences of the two co-authors on the challenges

we discuss. Specifically, we draw on experiences where the field consisted in major cities with the targeted experts being found in offices guarded by security personnel in ties and shirt cuffs, and others where transportation infrastructure was lacking and the relevant participants, indigenous people living in rural communities, were therefore hard to access. Common to these challenging contexts, we identify four overarching challenges that arise in the course of the research process: gaining access, positionality, researcher well-being, and data availability. We illustrate each of them with concrete examples and propose strategies to respond or mitigate them.

Lastly, the various solutions we propose identify specific strategies to deal with particular challenges and offer practical advice, with an emphasis on four overarching interpersonal skills that are crucial to success in the field: openness, empathy, humility, and flexibility. Although these interpersonal skills are found in some of the existing literature, their treatment tends to be rather implicit in political science, and they are rarely discussed as a diverse set of skills. This most likely occurs because there is an open debate over the extent to which such traits can be learned. In this debate, we take the position that good fieldworkers are made and not born, and that we can learn from others' experiences.

Generally, skills are defined as a "goal-directed behavior that is acquired by practice" (Proctor and Dutta 1995 as cited in McEnery and Blanchard 1999:156). In particular, interpersonal skills refer to "goal-oriented behaviors, including communication and relationship-building competencies, employed

in interpersonal interaction episodes characterized by complex perceptual and cognitive processes, dynamic verbal and nonverbal interaction exchanges, diverse roles, motivations, and expectancies" (Klein, DeRouin, and Salas 2006:81). Simply put, it refers to "the skills employed when persons interact with one another" (Klein et al. 2006:81). While scientists generally concur that interpersonal skills are to some extent innate to humans, research in the fields of business, economics, human geography, and psychology shows ample scope for individuals to develop and improve them. Focusing on these four skills, we believe, will prepare researchers to face the particular problems that are inherent to challenging contexts.

Building on the combined research experience of both co-authors, in research contexts that are broadly defined as challenging, the next section describes the four interpersonal skills mentioned above and how they help getting the most out of fieldwork in challenging places. The third section explains the fieldwork settings and the methodology used for the purpose of this contribution. The remainder of the article is organized along four challenges, in the order the field researcher is most likely to confront them: access, positionality, researcher well-being, and research design. Although a neat separation between them does not exist, we believe that the sequence is representative of many fieldwork experiences. Accordingly, it is only after having gained access that the researcher is directly confronted with issues of positionality. Researcher well-being, clearly the most cross-cutting issue in the fieldwork process, was in our experience most pronounced after we had already spent some time in the field.

Lastly, an informed revision of the research design takes place only once the data collection process in the field has already made progress. We illustrate how interpersonal skills help overcome the respective problems associated with each of the four challenges and how they may even turn challenges into chances.

Challenges Meet Interpersonal Skills: How Personal Attributes Help Navigating the Field

The challenges we deal with are not unique to challenging contexts. Gaining access, positionality, researcher well-being, and research design are considerations relevant to all research sites. Nevertheless, they tend to be more salient in challenging contexts, either with respect to the nature of the problem or the strategies they require in response. Take snowballing techniques, for instance, which are generally advocated to overcome access problems, but appear hardly suitable in politicized contexts where referral chains are interrupted by disconnected social networks (Cammett 2006). Yet, as we shall explain below, the researcher who is open and flexible can use existing cleavages to his or her advantage in order to bridge them.

To decide on the most beneficial strategy to deal with a given problem and seize the opportunities of the field, we identified a particular set of interpersonal skills as particularly relevant. Table 1 summarizes the challenges and the correspondent interpersonal skills to address or mitigate them. The skills highlighted in bold letters are those we found most relevant for each challenge.

Table 1. Relevant interpersonal skills to handle challenges and seize opportunities in the field.

Challenge	Interpersonal skill
Gaining access	openness, flexibility, humility
Positionality	flexibility, empathy, humility
Researcher well-being	humility, flexibility, openness
Research design and data collection	openness, flexibility

Source: Self-elaboration.

Since the terms are borrowed from the field of business and management studies and the skills needed in that discipline are not necessarily the same social scientists require, it is necessary to explain what each of them means.

By openness, we refer to a general disposition to experience situations that are unfamiliar or unusual, from the researcher's perspective. Openness is especially relevant in challenging fieldwork contexts where little is likely to turn out as planned and where the ability to respond quickly and smoothly to unforeseen situations can be crucial for the success of the research endeavor. A lack of openness is likely to result in frustration and, consequently, lesser efficiency, which leads to the loss of precious time in the field. As Table 1 shows, we found openness particularly relevant to gain access, in the dialectical process of data analysis and refining the research design.

A certain degree of openness is a precondition for flexibility, which represents the second interpersonal skill we identified as crucial in our research given

that successful fieldwork requires the disposition to change. In addition, flexibility requires a proactive attitude to adapt and reorganize one's tangible and intangible resources. We find that flexibility is key when assessing the relationship we establish with research participants and while evaluating how the fieldwork experience affects us and the quality of our research. Besides, a flexible attitude comes in handy when networks of informants are closed and fieldworkers need to open new channels of communication, as well as in the process of data analysis and research design when evidence has to be used in new and creative ways.

Thirdly, empathy is the ability to identify and understand other peoples' emotions. The need for scholars to be empathic towards research subjects has been amply discussed by fieldworkers, especially in the field of anthropology (McLean and Leibing 2007). Challenging contexts, however, make it potentially more difficult to be empathic: stressful circumstances and cultural differences are merely two of the reasons why. As Table 1 shows, we found empathy to be especially important in order to deal with some of the dilemmas of positionality we faced when reflecting on how our presence as researchers affected other participants.

Finally, humility refers to the recognition of the researcher's self in relation to the research objective and those who take part in it. Humility does not imply any form of understatement or modesty in one's aspirations. Quite to the contrary, it implies that researchers must express their expectations and needs explicitly, for instance, in their hope to interview a person of higher rank on a subject

matter they do not usually grant appointments for. Another example of humility is when a researcher confesses to be ignorant of a local insight everybody in the field seems to know of. Humility may even entail expressing physical needs such as thirst during an interview on a long day of fieldwork packed with meetings, something that tends to be seen as counterproductive to the image of the professional researcher. Put differently, then, humility means acknowledging our dependence on certain insights and individuals, as well as the possible limits to what is achievable in the field. Understood this way, we believe that humility helps researchers gain access and deal with challenges of positionality, that is, the dynamics of the researcher-researched relationship, as well as to ponder our own well-being in the context of field research (see Table 1).

The Research Experience: What We Did and How We Made Sense of It

To assess how the four interpersonal skills defined above help address the problems that may emerge while conducting field research in challenging contexts, we draw on the combined dissertation experience of both authors, which together comprised a total of five extended periods of fieldwork between 2011 and 2014. One project explored the management of territorial conflicts between pairs of states in two different regions. The comparative study involved fieldwork in four South American and six Southeast Asian countries. The second project sought to understand how different types of indigenous organizations affect ethnic party performance and the nature of political participation in six Bolivian rural towns. Despite the vastly different research objec-

tives, the two projects used similar methodological strategies for data collection. These were almost exclusively employed in the field.

Both projects relied heavily on interviews, which were complemented by data from official documents and media analyses, as well as participant observation in public and closed events. The two projects also involved a limited amount of archival work. Neither of us had prior experience in any of our fieldwork sites, and the first contact with the areas took place only when the research projects began.

The process of developing the conclusions presented in this paper began several months after having concluded the fieldwork. Back at our respective home institutions, friends and colleagues occasionally enquired about our fieldwork experience. Sharing insights in these informal settings set off a process of reflection, that later developed into a systematic effort after we were both asked to give a seminar on fieldwork for a methods summer school in political science. Ironically, it was during the presentation that we realized striking similarities both in the problems we had encountered during fieldwork and in the solutions we had found—often going through the same processes of trial and error. At first, given the rather dissimilar contexts of our field research, we thought it was not possible to come up with a common set of conclusions. Enquiring about the management of territorial disputes required locating informants mainly in the institutions placed in the administrative centers of the countries studied. Navigating bureaucratic hurdles and traffic in South America and Southeast Asia's large capital cities had little to do with the lack of road infrastructure

and the difficulty to access closed rural communities that characterized fieldwork for the project on political participation in rural Bolivia. In the latter context, a great deal of the field research entailed gaining access to indigenous leaders in remote communities and to community assemblies that were not open to outsiders. We then realized that despite superficial differences, both settings presented similar challenges and common strategies to navigate the difficulties, convincing us of the possibility to draw conclusions with a broader frame of reference, which we chose to define as challenging contexts.

The interpersonal skills discussed in this article were not consciously employed during our research. Instead, they are the result of a process of deep reflection on why we made particular practical choices after unsatisfactory and at times unpleasant experiences. In consequence, the following sections leave out many of the practical fieldwork advice found in the existing literature. Instead, we focus on what we see as a general attitude underlying the capacity to make informed choices about exactly these practical tools, namely: the interpersonal skills that influence how the field responds to our academic necessities. To illustrate how skills lead to concrete solutions, the following sections use selective examples, some that were common and others that were rare, but altogether critical experiences that eventually turned us into better researchers.

Gaining Access: Making and Keeping Contacts

Gaining access to key informants in challenging contexts is the first task researchers are confronted

with when initiating a field-based project. Three interpersonal skills proved especially relevant to successfully identify and secure access, as well as to earn the trust of our informants. These were: openness, flexibility, and humility. Openness was crucial to help us identify networks of informants and establish first contacts in an unfamiliar setting, while flexibility allowed us to devise a wide range of strategies to contact our interviewees. Lastly, by placing our informants at the center of our field research, humility helped us gain their trust.

Openness

Challenging contexts are, by definition, uncertain, which makes identifying contacts, gaining access to them, and earning their trust particularly difficult. Thus, when we first arrived to the field, we approached the most familiar group of people: academics. Local scholars provided us with an initial sense of what relevant actors we should reach out to, but as one of us quickly noticed in Bolivia, their suggestions sometimes excluded informants that later proved key for the research project due to their ideological biases.

As an illustration, one of the authors' first interviewees asked, "What have you read on Bolivian politics so far and who do you plan to talk to?" Somewhat disappointed on her response, he suggested, "*Compañera*, I will tell you who to contact and what to read" (Author interview, La Paz, July 14, 2011). The interviewee's use of the word *compañera* to refer to her alerted the author of his potential political biases, as in left-wing political circles, *compañera* means comrade or co-partisan. The researcher found out

that in Bolivia this term is used among members of a more leftist and class-based faction within the ruling party and by peasant union leaders. The interviewee's recommendations on what to read and who to contact therefore reflected this particular point of view on Bolivian politics.

Similarly, during another interview, she noticed that the informant greeted her using the word *hermana*, that is, sister. The term *hermana* is used by groups who assert that indigenous principles should guide the government, thus signaling a substantially different political viewpoint. While *compañera* and *hermana* were words familiar to the researcher, she was unfamiliar with their particular meaning in Bolivia. Correspondingly, it took her a while to understand that those two words not only indicated two different political perspectives, but also—and more important for her fieldwork—two different groups of interviewees that did not necessarily converse with one another. Consequently, although the researcher relied heavily on her academic contacts, the openness to understand the unfamiliar use of these two terms led her to better identify relevant networks of informants, their political biases, and how these might have affected her identification of other key informants.

Contacting and identifying relevant informants poses a significant challenge, especially in unfamiliar settings, where researchers are not always aware of the implicit protocols and behavioral codes to approach people. Once informants in Bolivia had been identified and contacted, for example, the researcher experienced unanticipated waiting times and even the cancellation of meetings before one of her

informants mentioned that there was an informal rule to call fifteen minutes before each meeting “to reconfirm.” It takes a fast and open learner to understand that behind such complications there can be different procedures rather than mere unreliability. Openness also helped the researcher navigate different organizational norms to request interviews. When seeking to interview the leaders of one of the main indigenous organizations in Bolivia, the researcher was invited to participate in an assembly, which began with a ritual that required all attendants to participate. The ritual consisted of standing up before an altar to pay respects to the Pachamama (mother earth), and to collect coca leaves to chew during the meeting. Her openness to experience this unfamiliar situation allowed her to gain access to the main leaders, as well as other members of the audience that perceived her as someone interested in their organization and culture.

Being open to different courses of action to gain access to informants is even more relevant when studying rural communities, which tend to be rather closed and distrustful of outsiders. One of us learned the hard way that travelling to rural communities without following the proper procedures for contacting people is likely to translate into utter failure, as individuals would refuse to talk to her. Comments such as “show me that you have authorization to be here” illustrate the lack of trust by community members. The researcher, therefore, had to be open to the different approaches that were necessary to secure access and trust in rural and urban settings, even though this required more time and effort on her part. Unlike urban areas where a phone call or e-mail would do, rural, indigenous com-

munities tend to be more distrustful of foreigners, which makes it essential to have a “bridge-builder” from the community who invites the outsider and introduces her to the key actors. When invited by a community member, especially an indigenous authority, the author found that most people were willing to talk to her, as she was perceived as an official guest or the friend of someone important. On one occasion, being the guest of the local indigenous authority granted the researcher an invitation to an event reserved solely for authorities. In that occasion, she had the unique opportunity to observe how politics were discussed among the leaders and how they related to one another, something that outsiders rarely witness. Without that critical link, which transformed an unauthorized intruder into a privileged participant in authority circles, it would have been impossible to conduct research in the rural areas. Naturally, the same applies to other closed communities, such as elite groups or religious sects.

Flexibility

Interviewing elites proved challenging for other reasons, as administrative and security procedures often block direct contact. However, being flexible helped devise two effective strategies to access elite informants. First, contrary to common textbook advice that important informants should be left for later in the process once researchers are already well-prepared and furnished with information by others (Hertel, Singer, and Van Cott 2009), we found that key elite informants were worth contacting early on. Not only did this strategy help to signal our respect for the elite’s hierarchy, but also served to entice collaboration from their subalterns. In effect,

one of us set up an appointment with the director of a division of the Indonesian Foreign Affairs Ministry, but frequented the same office several times before the meeting took place to interview assistants and consult brochures. When she eventually met the director, she already knew the office and could start the interview on familiarized terms.

Second, when contacting elite informants directly did not work, we found that switching to their immediate surrounding for information or as an access point was the most effective strategy. Where it first looked impossible to contact political, military, or indigenous leaders, we reached out to their advisors, long-term assistants, social activists and academics they worked with (also known as “soft contacts,” see: Kapiszewski et. al. 2015). The latter group proved especially helpful to gain access to higher-level informants. In her research in Southeast Asia, one of us made ample use of the fact that academic institutions are often closely connected to the government or traditional political parties. Not all too differently, the phenomenon of the revolving-door between academia and politics is found in many Latin American states, especially in the foreign policy and security sectors, as the relevant academic circles are generally small. It was also proven important to research potential political connections in advance. However, it was fundamental to make sure that academics with privileged access would not become reluctant gatekeepers. After one encounter in which the researcher challenged an academic on his—in her view—ideologically tainted publications, he withdrew a previous offer to arrange an interview with a former minister on the grounds that “he would not like your point of

view.” The lesson learned from this circumstance appeared on the same transcript of the interview: “Always formulate scrutinizing questions strictly in terms of academic debates when talking to people with an academic vocation, even if you think they are wrongly placed in academia.” Despite this particular experience, politicians, social movement leaders, and military personnel with an academic past or vocation were generally sympathetic to meet with us and happy to serve as a link with their political peers and seniors.

Flexibility was also crucial when we were faced with research settings marked by high polarization, as we initially believed that strong cleavages, regardless of their kind, would impair our ability to conduct research. However, circumventing sensitive issues proved awkward, as one of the researcher’s attempt to de-emphasize the obvious political polarization in Venezuela, when asking about political decision-making processes, led her interviewees to look at her in disbelief before speaking on the matter. Instead, through a flexible attitude that allowed us to quickly change strategies, it was possible not only to navigate particular divides, but also to use them in our favor. If Chávez’s supporters in Venezuela think one thing about a particular issue, what do you, as the opposition, think? Another example was when one of us had talked to a high-level politician in Singapore about an international crisis, she disclosed a particular piece of information to his counterpart in Malaysia, asking the latter to take position on the information given by his Singaporean counterpart. The interview was immediately granted as it gave the official an opportunity to defend his position.

This situation proved contrary to the general advice to avoid contentious issues when researching in polarized settings (Cammett 2006; Johnson 2009), since exposing certain sensitive information sparked the interest of many to tell “their side of the story.” In fact, when one of us mentioned that part of her research was precisely the issue of political polarization, people were even more enthusiastic in participating.

Humility

In addition to openness and flexibility, there is a third skill that helped us overcome many of the challenges detailed above: humility. This skill, nevertheless, operated differently depending on whether we were dealing with high-ranked informants, such as politicians, military officers, and indigenous leaders, or grassroots interviewees at the community level. Humility proved essential to signal that we really cared about our interviewees’ opinions. In dialogues with elite informants, a humble attitude reinforced power positions and thus, their authority and expertise on certain subjects. A simple comment such as, “I would like to talk to you, since you are the expert on the subject,” triggered immediate positive reactions from many interviewees and signaled that we were there to learn. This was especially relevant when interviewing military personnel with high ranks who are used to interact within hierarchical structures when talking about issues related to their work. Drawing on this skill, however, also proved useful when one of us interviewed an important politician, who, honored by the recognition of his academic trajectory, gave the researcher copies of most of the books he had published.

When speaking with grassroots participants, humility was generally welcomed with gratitude, as it meant giving voice to often-marginalized people who do not normally have the chance to tell their life stories. For one of us, humility was expressed by informing the interviewees about the importance of their contribution to the research project given the general (and her own) ignorance about how life and politics are practiced at the local level in rural areas and across indigenous communities. Showing a humble attitude also contributed to change initial positions of distrust towards the researcher among the same, rural community members in Bolivia. Being perceived as respectful or as recognizing certain authority helped us establish rapport with our informants and opened the way for second interviews and additional networks.

Positionality: Who Am I and Who Are They?

Like most post-graduate students today, before going to the field we had been exposed to literature on researcher identity—gender, age, race, class, religion, and nationality—and how it shapes the researcher-researched relationship (Kapoor 2004; Orbals and Rincker 2009). We left for the field highly self-conscious about the contrast (or so we thought) between our social position and that of our local target groups. Eventually, however, we both learned that we need a greater degree of flexibility in self-identification than we had initially imagined. This section highlights the benefits of being flexible in performing different identity roles in our role as researchers. In addition to flexibility, empathy and humility also helped avoid compromising the research and the well-being of those involved due to issues related to positionality.

Flexibility

Both of us felt we departed for the field from a comfortable position. We carried the name of a reputable home university and believed to be well-prepared academically to embark upon field research. White and from a middle-class background, we had grown up with the possibility to get to know environments of diverse origins and where the boundaries of class and religion were relatively more fluid, which had allowed us to develop an attitude towards openness and empathy regardless of these categories. We were prepared to be declined access for our young(ish) age, which we thought might be seen as a sign of lacking seriousness. Interestingly, however, this turned out to be an advantage at least to get our foot in the door. Both urban elites and people in the countryside were surprisingly receptive to our requests and generous with their time and information. Deliberately and explicitly put at the center of our interest, they were often enthusiastic to share insights they most likely discussed only within closed networks. As other female researchers noted, looking “unthreatening” is amongst the most efficient door-openers in the field (Chiswell and Wheeler 2016:232). If our researcher identity proved beneficial for *getting* an interview, however, we felt that it raised the hurdle for getting a *good* interview. Not being taken seriously meant the information we were given in many of our first interviews was irrelevant, imprecise, or greatly exaggerated.

Identity dynamics and the need for flexibility do not end at the door (see: Krasznai Kovács and Bose 2014). The most common setting in our fieldwork experience was one in which we dealt with older males,

some of whom quite apparently thought we could be sent off without a serious conversation. Following the often-repeated textbook advise, we sought to overcome the obstacle by demonstrating that we were well-versed in our subject matters. However, this only helped to a certain extent. Frequently confronted with questions such as, “So, have you already visited all the famous tourist sites?” or “Which of our beautiful beaches do you like most?,” we realized that people seemed to assume that entertaining oneself in places far away from home was, if not the primary, then at least a secondary goal of the research visit. To dismiss such assumptions, we began to share insights into what fieldwork actually implied. This meant giving up on our initial idea that as professional researchers we needed to adhere to a strict separation between our research activities and private life during fieldwork. Instead, to make clear that one’s life in the field was a working life, we shared details about our daily schedule and research progress with interlocutors and interview partners. As this improved the quality of our interviews, we began casually dropping comments that put in evidence the time dedicated to work activities during the weekends, for example, to prepare upcoming lectures at local universities or to complete reports. Flexibility in what our role required allowed our counterparts to understand the genuine intellectual effort behind the undertaking and helped them see their own potential role in it.

The most salient feature of identity we perceived to be problematic in our relations in the field was gender. Unexpectedly, some of the most unsettling situations in this regard occurred in relation to other women when these perceived us as a threat and

protested our professional relationship with their male colleagues or partners. One of us was challenged by the partner of an indigenous leader who began shouting, “I am his wife,” as she threw her chair away in anger, during the celebration that followed a local assembly. This woman protested what she considered excessive attention on the part of her partner, who sat next to the researcher and only talked to her during the gathering. These types of situations risk blocking access, especially to other women. After this damaging experience, the researcher made sure that, when possible, she established contact (with the anyway few) women directly to avoid being associated only to a male contact.

In relation to men, some interviewees voiced their opinion that, “Young ladies don’t need to bother about this.” Following the well-established advice to avoid strong reactions and relax (Mügge 2013), playing the unthreatening researcher, we ignored this type of comment in order to not jeopardize our research. Not all of the remarks were as easily ignored, however, and over time we both felt increasingly unsatisfied with the ostrich strategy of simply burying our heads in the sand. To compensate for what we felt was a compromise between our research objectives and our position as self-confident women, we adopted two strategies.

First, we became more flexible at performing gender, accepting that in fieldwork, “making compromises and being compromised [sic]...is to be expected since all research studies are a complex mix of opportunism, compromise [sic], serendipity and skill” (Ross 2001:163). The benefits of performing gender stereotypes were clear when it gave the

“young lady” the power to put her interview partner into the flattering position of being the only resourceful person to help her out on a topic she *did* want to bother about. Specifically, it helped keep the interviewee talking, getting the researcher another appointment or an event invitation. Conscious that performing gender stereotypes surely does little to enhance the position of females generally, we obviously did not feel proud of using this strategy. In addition, therefore, we relied on a second approach that required not only flexibility, but also empathy and humility.

Empathy, Humility

The second strategy to counter disadvantageous gender stereotypes consisted in paying greater attention to identity roles other than gender. Apart from being female, we had a role as academics, as representatives of an internationalized education system, of a certain religious group, nationality, age group, et cetera. To identify which of these characteristics could establish a more equally leveled playing field that would also put the research participant at ease, empathy was needed. At the same time, establishing a positionality in which both the researcher and the participant felt comfortable required humility in order to recognize and deal with context-specific hierarchies. Education, for example, is a characteristic that is dominant in the context of political science research, which put our position as aspiring PhD researchers above most of the academic experience of our interviewees. Humility proved relevant to acknowledge this situation and the fact that there are other characteristics that establish roles with a reverse power relationship. Thus, education is easily re-defined from a university

degree (what the researcher has) to local or practical knowledge about the subject matter (what the participant has). Emphasizing characteristics other than the dominant ones, such as gender, proved beneficial to put ourselves and the research participant at greater ease.

By combining gender and other identities, we sought to establish an equilibrium where we could be seen as insiders while remaining at a sufficient distance from the research field to observe and study the phenomenon of interest appropriately. Insidership can be created—even in vastly different cultural contexts—through the use of common points of identification. Given the long history of disagreements over borders, being a Chilean researcher in neighboring Bolivia is not necessarily an advantage, but being from a rural province in Chile established a form of “us” that created trust. While empathy helped us point out these areas of identification, our interviewees often elucidated them themselves. Elites who had travelled in Europe remembered their holidays in the Italian city of Florence, where the home institution of one of us was located. Alternatively, Italy’s soccer team Juventus Turin did the trick to get a conversation started.

On the other hand, accepting and performing the outsider position provided opportunities such as joining a group of Malaysian Defense Ministry officials for a conversation over tea after office hours, something that female Malaysian researchers and possibly other female Muslims could not simply do on their own. Differences also allowed us to ask blunt questions without being rebuffed. One of us learned that Thai soldiers brought amulets with them when

being deployed to a disputed border. When asked for the reason why, the obvious ignorance of this tradition allowed the soldiers to freely deliberate on how much they entrusted their military performing to faith, and how much to their own fighting capacity. In this case, naïveté had clearly turned into an advantage (see also Townsend-Bell 2009:312).

Researcher Well-Being as an Ethical Responsibility

Fieldwork may take a high physical and psychological toll on researchers (Moscuza and Lunn 2014). Most guidelines on qualitative research focus first and foremost on the impact fieldwork has on participants and the ethical responsibilities this involves for the researcher. Very little has been said about how field research affects the researchers themselves (exceptions are Belousov et al. 2007; Mitchell and Irvine 2008; Smith 2014). Researcher well-being is important for more than the investigators’ personal sake, but also because it affects the quality of our work and is a requirement for a number of academic standards such as the unbiased reporting of facts and the separation of personal feelings from the professional task. Challenging contexts raise, in particular, a series of issues that affect researchers’ well-being, both physically and mentally. Openness to a different rhythm of daily life, unknown traditions, and potentially distrustful people, to name a few, is the first essential attitude to prevent negative emotional and physical reactions during field research. However, once the circumstances have begun to affect the researcher in a negative manner, a strategy to cope with these situations becomes necessary. In this section, we

report how humility and flexibility proved key to maintain our well-being in the course of our fieldwork experience.

Humility

Humility is the first skill we drew on to make sense of unsettling feelings such as discomfort and insecurity, triggered by field research in challenging contexts. By allowing us to recognize how we felt, a humble attitude helped us deal with different situations such as negative emotional responses, uneasiness about sensitive issues or distrust to certain informants. It also led us to seek help in order to prevent these feelings from affecting our research.

As it was previously discussed, both of us experienced situations with male interviewees that affected our emotional well-being (see also Sharp and Kremer 2006; Mügge 2013). Being asked out for dates by male interviewees or dismissed for being young women led to feelings of frustration that took an emotional toll that was sometimes not noticeable until we returned to our home institutions and began organizing our fieldwork material. In the course of fieldwork, however, peer counseling was crucial. Seeking our peers' help began by humbly acknowledging that such experiences had negatively affected us personally and possibly professionally. In order to prevent distressing interview situations from affecting the quality of our interpretations, discussing these issues, especially with female colleagues either in the field or who shared our recent fieldwork experience, was helpful to untangle the potential effects they could have on our writing process.

Sharing them helped us process our experiences and feel less isolated, as most of our female colleagues had experienced similar situations during their fieldwork, many times without even pondering their effects on their research. Furthermore, through these discussions, we also gathered practical advice that allowed us to prevent these situations by, for instance, meeting with interviewees during office hours when other people were around; respectfully but clearly conveying our discomfort when someone held our hand during interviews; rejecting invitations that were clearly inappropriate; and clarifying the terms of our professional relationship with male informants from the outset to prevent misunderstandings. Humility thus turned into an empowering tool that made our fieldwork experience safer and prevented potential biases in our writing process.

Similarly, while none of us investigated particularly sensitive issues, unsettling topics became part of our projects without our anticipation, such as human rights abuses and political repression. Initially, we pressured ourselves to deal quickly with our emotional reactions and to not let them interfere with the successful completion of the field research. However, humility to recognize that time was sometimes necessary to adapt or to find the right strategy to cope with our rejection to certain interviewees or particular experiences was crucial. Pondering the feelings these interviewees triggered, we noticed that discomfort and distrust were the most common reactions. Acknowledging that such feelings were not a sign of weakness, but a rather healthy reaction to emotionally challenging situations allowed us to assess whether these

were making way into our interpretations of facts. Making the emotional reactions to sensitive issues part of the research process was important, since it led to the adoption of strategies that looked to corroborate the information collected and cancel out potential biases. For example, one of us decided to “pair” her interview materials by matching informants that triggered negative emotions with others with similar characteristics, but who did not elicit such feelings. With this she was able to identify the influence of distressful situations.

In another experience related to foreign policy-making during a specific period of Latin America’s military dictatorships, one of us kept being told about repressive measures against domestic political opponents, including mass violations of human rights. Although the researcher insisted that her investigation concerned foreign policy-making only, some individuals kept referring to human rights violations, either justifying or downplaying them. Feeling instrumentalized for the personal catharsis of the former perpetrators, she found herself tempted to stop interviewing that particular relevant group of persons. Eventually, however, rather than shying away from the negative feelings the interviews caused, she came to embrace them as a valid reaction. Ultimately, the human rights violations that had initially been a tangential issue to her research became a major finding as a pattern emerged when the topic came up in the interviews.

As it is detailed in the following section, flexibility was also necessary to address our emotional response to sensitive issues and allowed us to change our strategies to be able to use the material in the most objective way possible.

Flexibility

The cultural gap and the lack of knowledge about the proper practices in foreign countries triggered feelings of insecurity and sometimes anxiety. A flexible attitude allowed us to rely on new strategies that helped us feel safer and more comfortable.

Conducting research in unfamiliar settings, away from our usual support networks and where we were constantly reminded of our foreign status at times triggered feelings of isolation (see also Palriwala 2005). This loneliness was heightened by the few opportunities there were to discuss some of the challenges we faced on a daily basis with our local informants and scholars, either because there was little time, or because some of our emotional reactions were simply not shared by insiders. We found that sharing these emotions with other researchers was useful to prevent these feelings from affecting the quality of our fieldwork, even if these did not know the precise context of our field. The local institutions we were affiliated with provided emotional support during the few, but impactful moments where we felt disconnected from our environment and overwhelmed by a particular situation (see also Wong 2015). Acknowledging that we were struggling with certain situations required humility, as well as the flexibility to temporarily put aside our roles as professional researchers during the moments we felt emotionally strained.

Likewise, one of us found that establishing contacts with local graduate students at a similar phase in the research process was helpful, as it made the foreign fieldworker feel less isolated and provided

a support group both academically and emotionally. When possible, we also decided to partner with other researchers, especially those with better knowledge of local culture and conditions. One of us, for instance, began taking field trips with a local PhD student who was also conducting his dissertation research, and who helped her navigate cultural differences by explaining what certain activities entailed and the appropriate procedures to gain access to the community. Generally, taking breaks from fieldwork helped overcome the instances when we felt overwhelmed and allowed us to return to the field with renewed energies.

It is important to emphasize that the numerous strategies to cope with the mental and physical consequences of doing field research continued to be relevant upon our return from the field. When revising some of the early drafts of the thesis, written immediately after fieldwork, we realized that emotions had found their way into our writing despite our intentions to be “objective.” Therefore, it is important to be aware of these issues whenever one uses material collected during field research, even if significant time has transpired. Indeed, we found that some distance helped better assess how emotions were affecting the research process. Since personal well-being eventually influences the quality of academic work, the researcher’s well-being needs to be considered among other ethical responsibilities of fieldwork.

Research Design and Data Analysis

The fourth major challenge examined is the difficulty to achieve accuracy and external validity

when conducting research in challenging contexts. Data that is hard to access and data that is simply non-existent renders the best of research designs futile and fly in the face of the expectation that serious social science ought to look “scientific.” The preference for formal research methods surely varies across disciplines, but it is no exception to read that “many political scientists...dismiss research in foreign countries as a waste of time and money” (Hertel et. al. 2009:305). With a commitment to produce original research, however, openness, together with a degree of flexibility, provides the researcher with several strategies that can help overcome particular difficulties in gathering the “right” data. This section shows that missing information does not necessarily require radical changes to the original research design. Openness and flexibility, in contrast, can help to change focus and identify “alternative” data that fill in the void of missing data.

Openness

When the data collection method risks failing, we often turn too quickly to our research design to make what we believe to be necessary changes. However, substantial changes are not always necessary nor are they always advisable (Höglund 2011:118; see also Zulauf 1999). As a matter of fact, in social research, the method should be “the servant, not the master” (see chapter seven, Firebaugh 2008). In our experience, we learned about the lack of specific data once we were in the field, with few possibilities to reallocate resources. Given that major changes to our projects were beyond what was possible, we needed a different solution. With time,

we realized that maintaining an open attitude towards unknown contexts led to a learning process in which it was possible to identify alternative data by interpreting information previously deemed irrelevant for our research design through a new lens.

First, openness let us see more than a single way of reading data. One of us learned this insight after a frustrating experience at the Cambodian President's Office. After several meetings in a unit that had temporarily been established there, she obtained digital copies that were promised to be "highly relevant." The USB stick was safely brought home, but when it was inserted in a computer, a virus alert popped up and the antivirus software left the infested files inaccessible. Several attempts to recover the files failed, and the person who had made them available reacted angrily at the request to facilitate the data once more: "You asked for the information, you got the information. There is no more for me to do." Only after the initial frustration ebbed away, the researcher realized that the fact the unit's computers carried viruses did in fact support her previous impression that it was of rather limited importance in the decision-making process. The anecdote did not make it into her PhD thesis—the "chaotic circumstances" of data collection seldom do (Nilan 2002)—but the conclusions drawn from an alternative reading of the (missing) data did. Similarly, after initial interviews with the leaders and rank-and-file of one of the main indigenous organizations in Bolivia, the researcher was rather puzzled to notice that the responses to her questions were almost exactly the same. They replicated what seemed to be an "official" discourse. While she was first disappointed, she later understood

that together with a heightened sense of loyalty, this unified discourse suggested that members of the organization were constrained by a strong internal discipline. This particular aspect of the organizational structure turned into the central argument of her thesis.

Secondly, openness also helped us recognize what actually constitutes data. In one of our research experiences, a negotiator in an international conflict claimed he had established a close relationship with his counterpart on the opposing side. Such a reading was in line with the official position of his government, but contradicted what other negotiators had previously told the researcher. To evidence the allegedly close ties he had created, the interviewee said he could contact his counterpart any time on a messenger service where they were friends. Positively surprised, the researcher replied that she would soon travel to the place his counterpart was located at and asked for an introduction. Despite repeated requests, the contact was never made. At first, the researcher regarded the experience as no more than a failed attempt to expand her network of informants. However, her perception changed months after when she found herself in a similar situation, but this time the negotiator effectively got her an interview with his counterpart. Surely experiences like this one do not represent pieces of data or evidence on their own; however, cumulatively they are essential to make sense of the field in a way that other methods most likely cannot.

To make the most of such seemingly random experiences, we consider it relevant to repeat once

more some well-established advice: note-taking is crucial. Even for an open researcher, the process of recognizing and re-interpreting data requires time and single experiences often get forgotten during intensive periods of fieldwork. Together, we possess 21 notebooks full of interviews, reports, and observations from the fieldwork experiences described here. Looking in retrospect, nevertheless, we wish we had documented in an even better way our own impressions and the casual discussions and jokes from the field. Given that this type of regret occurs frequently, researchers are well-advised to always write down too much rather than too little.

Flexibility

While openness introduces a way to deal with missing data by re-interpreting information, flexibility helps find proxies in a creative way and adapt our strategies to collect data. This necessity arose strongly in the case of Malaysia, where an often arbitrarily applied internal security act complicated access to even the most trivial information. As it turned out to be impossible to know what aspiring navy officers were taught about specific security problems, the researcher was tempted to dismiss the case study. However, when a local academic came up with an alternative solution where the freely accessible essay topics for the final examination of the military academy could be used as a proxy for what they had studied in class, the country could be incorporated into the investigation. Thus, identifying the proxy provided a cost-free and relatively easy way out of what had initially appeared to be a problem with no solution.

Conclusions

A war-torn country, a community of difficult access, and research on polarized political settings all represent what we described as challenging contexts. Challenging contexts, regardless of their type, are similar in that the researcher is faced with high levels of uncertainty. We have identified four particular challenges fieldworkers face when researching in these contexts: access, positionality, researcher well-being, and data collection. These may not be unique to challenging contexts, but so are their intensity, the responses they require, and the opportunities they provide. Advice on how to confront these challenges often comes in late, once the fieldworker has already had to deal with them and perhaps had done so in a suboptimal way.

Based on our experiences, we offered several suggestions for scholars on how to prepare themselves for field research in challenging contexts. These can be synthesized into four broad categories of interpersonal skills, which we believe allow the researcher to find practical solutions to potential problems as they arise. First, openness to new contexts, cultures, and experiences is key for researchers to fully embrace and enjoy the process of fieldwork. Second, empathy is crucial to understand the viewpoint of those who participate in our research projects, as well as our own role in the research process. Third, a healthy portion of humility helps recognize that many things are beyond our understanding, that often we need to ask for help, and that it is necessary to level the playing field of power asymmetries between ourselves and our research subjects. Finally, field researchers need flexibility to adapt to uncertain and changing

circumstances in order to alter the course of action when a network of informants is closed, when data is not available, and when faced with unsettling or potentially risky situations.

Good fieldworkers are not born; they are made. Our approach emphasizes not particular practices, but skills that will allow fieldworkers to better assess which specific strategies are adequate when facing a challenge. Precisely because of its breadth, a skill-based approach will prove more effective to deal with the uncertainty of challenging contexts across a variety of research settings, including rural and urban settings and elite and grassroots participants, as we have shown.

The suggestions put forward in this article, we hope, will help scholars improve the quality of their field research and consequently of their research projects. By concentrating on interpersonal skills, the task of “going to the field” can become a professionally and

personally beneficial experience. Specifically, having a broader toolkit to deal with the unexpected aspects of conducting field research will better prepare the fieldworker to gauge the costs and benefits involved in the decisions they make, to be rigorous while enjoying the research process, and to be prudent while seizing the opportunities challenging contexts will bring them.

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