DOING FIELDWORK IN AREAS OF INTERNATIONAL INTERVENTION

A Guide to Research in Violent and Closed Contexts

Edited by Berit Bliesemann de Guevara and Morten Bøås

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1

Doing fieldwork in areas of international intervention into violent and closed contexts

Berit Bliesemann de Guevara and Morten Bøås

This is a book about fieldwork. It is not yet another volume about research methods, the pros and cons of qualitative versus quantitative research, or the virtues of mixed-methods approaches. There are plenty of these guidebooks and all of them contain useful information, but they generally also turn a blind eye to the messy *practice* of fieldwork, which is different from reading about field-based methods and research designs. This book is about *experiences of doing fieldwork*. A gender-balanced group of authors at different stages of their careers, working in central and southeast Asia, the Middle East, central, west, and south Africa, the Caucasus and southeast Europe—some of them nationals of the countries under study—raise questions about and reflect on how they did fieldwork in areas of international intervention into violent conflict and/or illiberal states. These experiences are neither the sanitized versions of the messy reality of fieldwork, which we find in the majority of methods sections of research monographs and articles;[1] nor are they the hero or adventurer stories some of us tell each other at conferences over a drink (we both plead guilty to have done this on occasion). Rather, this book assembles the frank, (self-) critical accounts of field researchers who have taken the courage to publicly reflect upon some of their mistakes and to name the dilemmas of fieldwork in violent and closed contexts—dilemmas that we can prepare to face, but that we cannot resolve (for a similar approach, see Kušić and Zahora, 2020; Rivas and Browne, 2019).

The authors in this book write from a first-person perspective focusing on personal reflections of their practices, performances and positionalities in the field. Their contributions address questions currently discussed in related literatures—such as the question of how positionality and intersectionality affect the research process (for example, Caretta and Jokinen, 2017; Dempsey, 2017; Kappler and Lemay-Hébert, 2019; Thapar-Björkert and Henry, 2004)—however, they do so not from the comfort of (meta-)theoretical positions but from their own hard-earned experiences in the field. Authors also touch upon the research approaches they have taken (for example, positivist or interpretivist research; cf. Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012) and the methods used—which cover a wide range from interviews with intervention elites, focus groups with sex workers, and surveys among refugees to participatory observation among political activist, and drawing workshops with violence-affected communities—and highlight the advantages and difficulties of these methods in the violent or illiberal contexts discussed. Their main focus, however, is on the more generable difficulties and dilemmas that any fieldwork in violent or closed contexts presents to the researcher and that seem to cut across the very different epistemological and methodological stances represented by the authors.[2]

Why do we see the need for such a book? The main reason is that this is the type of book we would have loved to read when we embarked on our first attempts at doing fieldwork in areas of armed conflict, military deployment and peacebuilding interventions, and it is the type of book we would like to discuss with our students and the PhD researchers supervised by us before they do so. While every field and fieldwork are certainly unique, many of the dilemmas, ethical pitfalls and mismatches between pre-fieldwork plans and fieldwork reality are remarkably similar. The only book available to us when we embarked on our careers as fieldwork-based researchers in violence-affected contexts was Nordstrom and Robben's (1996) *Fieldwork under Fire*. While this book is still a great read, which we recommend without hesitation, much has changed since it was written—changes that affect not only how we understand the world we live in, but also how we do fieldwork. Most importantly, while there is a higher number of researchers conducting fieldwork now than there was perhaps ever before, fieldwork today tends to be much shorter, is conducted by researchers from other disciplines than those classically involved in fieldwork, and the choice of the field and time spent in the field are more impacted upon by an increase in risk aversion at most universities of the Global North. We return to these issues in more detail below.

To be sure, we do not think that any text can replace the hard lessons, let alone the rollercoaster of emotions (Hedström, 2018; Rivas and Browne, 2019), all researchers will have to endure in the field, yet we also think that not every academic in this line of research needs to repeat the same mistakes. Letting students and colleagues know that others have struggled with the same issues and learning about how other researchers have tried to deal with them, will, we hope, be helpful to our professional community. As the authors of *Designing Social Inquiry* in qualitative research have cautioned us, '[Researchers] mistakenly believe that other social scientists find close, immediate fits between data and research. This perception is due to the fact that investigators often take down the scaffolding after putting up their intellectual buildings, leaving little trace of the agony and uncertainty of construction' (King, Keohane and Verba, 1994, pp. 12–13). This book puts the 'scaffolding', 'agony' and 'uncertainty of construction' of fieldwork-based research centre-stage.

Many of the experiences discussed speak to a broader community of researchers or are similar to questions discussed in other publications, yet authors in this book also highlight the particular challenges and dilemmas arising from research in a specific area of study: *fieldwork in areas of international intervention*, broadly conceived, *characterized by past or present violent conflict and/or illiberal stateness* (for example, Bekmurzaev, Lottholz and Meyer, 2018; Glasius *et al.*, 2018; Sriram *et al.*, 2009). Intervention research in war and post-war societies, including in authoritarian states, emerged as an important interdisciplinary field of study in the 1990s, accompanying liberal interventionism's rise and its critique. It has since not only grown but also attracted researchers from a wide range of social-scientific and arts-and-humanities disciplines. Fieldwork has become a central modus of conducting research in this field and is no longer the prerogative of social anthropology, the discipline most actively training its scholars for field-based research in countries of the Global South. And while certainly a lot has improved over the last 15 years or so, fieldwork-based methods training in theory-loaded disciplines such as International Relations is only slowly catching up with the fact that more and more of its researchers are conducting fieldwork-based empirical research on interventions. Fieldwork practice therefore often remains a 'muddling through' rather than a conscious engagement with the field, and much of what is being called fieldwork tends towards shorter (if not fleeting) visits, most of which would not qualify in any way as 'ethnography', despite an inflationary use of this term (see further, Millar, 2017; Schatz, 2009; Vrasti, 2008). Yet, even the classical anthropological fieldwork with its emphasis on

long-term immersion in one location has clearly become 'red-listed' for some time.

There are several reasons for this. One has to do with the increased risk aversion of many universities to fieldwork (Strazzari and Peter, 2016), which we discuss in more detail below and in Part II of this book. Yet, the old ways of doing fieldwork are also changing because the world has changed. As global social anthropology has long acknowledged, researchers on fieldwork are no longer disappearing into off-the-beaten-track villages with little or no connectivity to the rest of the world (for example, Gupta and Ferguson, 1997). Rather, most of the research subjects are just as connected as the researchers. This, together with the fact that the sources of intervention politics are based in different locations, implemented by a range of different actors, and originating and taking effect at different scales of politics at the same time, makes the question of where 'the field' is actually located particularly pertinent.

Is 'the field' of intervention studies in Northern capitals and headquarters of international organizations, or their Southern areas of deployment (cf. Bliesemann de Guevara, 2012)? What characterizes these locations of intervention, that are supposedly 'peacekept' or 'post-conflict' but where peacekeepers and civilian staff live in highly guarded compounds that effectively separate them from most meaningful interactions with the populations they have come to serve (Duffield, 2010; Fisher, 2017; Heathershaw and Lambach, 2008; Smirl, 2015)? How does this 'field' look different when it is not liberal interveners, but illiberal states managing the conflict (Heathershaw and Owen, 2019)? Is the field located among the local communities in conflict zones, among specific socio-professional groups such as political activists, soldiers, humanitarian aid workers, sex workers or, indeed, academics-as-interveners, or at the interplay between 'natives' and 'outsiders' (for example, Autesserre, 2014; Goetze, 2017; Lai, in this volume)? Is it on the Internet or in the media as virtual ideological battlefields (Bliesemann de Guevara and Kostić, 2017)? Or perhaps all of the above simultaneously?

The answer to the question of where the field in intervention studies is will partially depend on the specific focus or puzzle a researcher chooses to address, but it is also clear that locating 'the field' only in certain locations of the Global South or among the most obvious participant groups is not enough to understand the interventionist part of international politics (for example, McNeill, in this volume; Richmond, Kappler and Bjørkdahl, 2015), and this realization also shapes, or ought to shape, fieldwork on international interventions in

violent or closed contexts. This said, it seems that the most pressing challenges still arise from fieldwork located in the actual geographical locations in which interventions politics is implemented, as it is here where researchers are most directly subjected to the effects of violent or repressive politics on their research. It should not come as a surprise then that most authors in this book concentrate on this type of field.

Dilemmas of fieldwork-based intervention research in violent and closed contexts

In the following we carve out those areas of questions, challenges and dilemmas arising from fieldwork-based research in areas of international intervention, which we think are particularly pertinent and which are developed further in the contributions to this book. There are four broad types of challenges and dilemmas that we consider particularly pertinent and universal beyond the context-specificity of each individual research: control and confusion, security and risk, distance and closeness, and sex and sensitivity. While they are not exclusive to the field of intervention research, we argue that the dilemmas discussed, and the research ethics interwoven with them (cf. Brewer, 2016; Cronin-Furman and Lake, 2018, Fujii, 2012; Helbardt *et al.*, 2010), take on specific forms in the particular contexts of interventions into violent conflicts and/or illiberal states.

Control, confusion and failure in the research process

The first set of dilemmas arises from the tension between the ideal of control in and over fieldwork and the actual confusion in the research process, a tension that most fieldwork-based researchers will have grappled with at one point or another. 'Control' is the normal portrayal of the research process by the apt field researcher. With a few noticeable exceptions, we find (meta-)narratives of control in most guidebooks on field research and fieldwork-based methods and in the grant proposals researchers write to convince funders to finance their research. No wonder then that many first-time researchers experience confusion, if not outright feelings of personal failure, when the expectations and (self-)narratives of control over the research process meet the messy reality of fieldwork-based research (Kušić and Zahora, 2020; Perera, 2017a). While this reality check does not only concern research in violent and closed contexts, it is in these contexts with their tense social dynamics that the perception and reality of loss of control over the research process can be particularly profound—and

potentially dangerous for the researcher and those they interact with in different roles as assistants, informants, participants or wider communities in which research takes place.

Interviews are an illustrative example of the effects that a violent or illiberal context can have on how we access informants or interviewees and secure their consent or how we determine the form the interview will take. Also what is shared in an interview is influenced in particular ways by such contexts (paradigmatic: Fujii, 2010, on meta-data in interviews about war and mass violence). The most common form of intervention research interview is certainly the elite or expert interview, which is usually seen as fairly unproblematic as it does not involve vulnerable participants and is mostly done in a 'safe location' such as the intervened country's capital (although power relations at play in elite interviews are also recognised: see Boucher, 2017). Yet, as Roland Kostić shows (Chapter 2), interviewing intervention elites brings about its own series of challenges and dilemmas. Through his discussion of interview-based research with international intervention elites in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kostić shows how long-term engagement with this field, shared family and career backgrounds with his interlocutors, and his shifting roles as researcher and policy expert have been crucial for opening the door to these elite networks in a way that has allowed for behind-the-scenes insights and information far beyond a formal expert interview situation. However, he also reflects on how this privileged access posed central dilemmas: in order to keep the access, he had to decide how to deal with invitations to contribute to the policy process as expert and to constantly balance which information to include in his writings and which to ignore. Long-term research access to elites is thus not a one-way street, and the researcher can quickly find him- or herself in a position where the line between being a critical scholar and a member of a policy network becomes increasingly blurred.

Often, elite interviews go to plan but—perhaps due to a lack of privileged back-stage access as the one described above—they may not generate anywhere near the kind of insights that the researcher had expected based on a previous analysis of available documents. This rather common experience may put the whole research design into question and, consequently, the researcher into momentary crisis, as in the case of Casey McNeill's research on the US Africa Command (AFRICOM) (Chapter 3). Her chapter reminds us of the mismatches that often exist between the intervention's official narrative of its purpose and the actual priorities and practices encountered in interviews at the headquarters, and cautions us that intervention research based on published material such as the intervening organization's

self-descriptions, documents and evaluations can be utterly misguiding in understanding how staff do their day-to-day work and make sense of it. McNeill's chapter offers useful strategies of how to overcome such challenges with the help of interpretivist methodologies.

Among non-elite research participants in violent and/or illiberal contexts, already the mere use of the word 'interview' may scare cautious research participants away, as Markus Göransson reports from Tajikistan (Chapter 4). He recounts how he went into the field, equipped with literature-based knowledge on how to conduct oral history interviews and secure the informed consent of interlocutors, only to find that doing formal interviews would make his research among Tajik veterans of the Afghan–Soviet war largely impossible. Rather, Göransson's data gathering took place ad hoc, in informal, private and often group settings, requiring flexibility and creativity on his behalf and a willingness to relinquish control of the process to some extent. While the author does not delve deeper into the history of interviewing and how it is culturally and politically charged in some contexts, critical security studies scholars have pointed out the deep affinities between states' disciplining techniques and scientific research method (for example, Aradau and Huysmans, 2014; Borneman and Masco, 2015). That researcher behaviour may have different, potentially damaging, consequences in illiberal/repressive contexts than it does in liberal states, is also argued by Jesse Driscoll (Chapter 10), whose contribution we discuss in more detail below.

Violent contexts equally represent specific challenges and threats to researchers and their collaborators and brokers, as highlighted by Morten Bøås (Chapter 5). Bøås offers a self-critical reflection on his research with local associates in the highly insecure context of the Sahel. Specifically, he unpacks how researchers from the Global North may wittingly or unwittingly incentivize associates to adopt risky strategies. At the centre of his reflections are questions of friendship and respect in research with assistants from the intervened country, and how both are shaped by the unequal power relationships involved in such North–South collaborations due to the money and career opportunities the Northern researcher brings to the table (cf. also the contributions in Eriksson Baaz and Utas, 2019). Bøås's reflections are insightful not least because he describes the mixed bag of emotions experienced during fieldwork in this highly dangerous setting where researchers have more recently become the explicit target of some armed groups. It is only in hindsight that Bøås is able to make sense of the wider political and security situations at play and of his own passive and active roles in shaping the unpleasant fieldwork encounters described.

All these are just examples of the issues discussed in Part I of the book, but what they illustrate is how even the most prepared or experienced researchers have struggled with the idea of control over the fieldwork-based research process in a closed or violent context, and how this has affected the fieldwork plans, the data generated and the people involved. The examples also show that there is no way to prevent researchers in areas of intervention from having to take decisions on the go, no matter how prepared they enter 'the field', and the authors discuss how they have dealt with these challenges, for better or (in some cases) for worse.

The debate of control and confusion in fieldwork-based research discussed in Part I of this book also links to a broader emergent debate on researcher failure (see specifically, Kušić and Zahora, 2020). As experiences reported throughout this book suggest, perceptions of 'failure' in research are not the exception but the rule. In general, however, failure—once the basis of positivist research in the form of Popper's falsification that leads to progress in science—seems to have been pushed into the shadows of private conversations among friends or close colleagues. The propensity to acknowledge (or not) failures in the research process has less to do with the general approach a researcher is taking, although qualitative-interpretivist approaches may be more prone to embrace 'failures' as those moments of surprise or 'creative ruptures' that spark research in the first place (Kurowska and Bliesemann de Guevara, 2020). Rather, the silencing of failures and dilemmas in research is a bigger problem that has to do with research as a career and academia as a competitive marketplace, in which individuals compete for positions, promotions and research funding. Normalizing supposed 'failure' in academia would go a long way in addressing some of the dilemmas around control and confusion in fieldwork—as it would reveal that what is deemed failure is actually the effect of a sanitized and formalized understanding of what social-scientific research entails.

Dilemmas of security and risk

The tense social dynamics of violent or repressive contexts do not only affect the access to or course of interviews, but also what observations and findings can be written about and how. Indeed, in both contexts there may be very good reasons for a researcher to relinquish control and not publish specific information, as this may put at risk not only the researcher's future access (a bearable cost), but more importantly the safety of local collaborators and their families, who cannot leave the country when things go from bad to worse (Bekmurzaev,

Lottholz and Meyer, 2018; see also, Vanderstaay, 2005; on the general necessity to decolonize research relationships, see Adedi Dunia *et al.*, 2019). As Bøås's contribution suggests, when it comes to research with local brokers or collaborators, the financial and career opportunities represented by the Northern researcher may indeed cause things to spin out of control, if they incentivize a collaborator to take more risks in a violent or highly state-monitored situation than they would normally do.

The second set of challenges and dilemmas of fieldwork-based research in violent and closed contexts unpacked in this book revolves around such questions of security and risk. Much of the research discussed in this book takes place in areas that are classified as posing a heightened risk to researchers, their collaborators and research participants, either because of active armed violence in the area of fieldwork, or because the research may put them at risk of repressive measures by the security agencies of the state in which the research takes place. Sometimes it is both at the same time. There is a certain tendency among conflict and intervention researchers to downplay these risks, based on experiences of successful—in the sense of uneventful—research (again, we probably have to plead guilty of having done so on occasion), and it may well be that most research taking place in the contexts discussed in this book remains untainted by violence or state repression. We would like to caution against too sweepingly brushing security concerns away, however: researchers may be specifically targeted by some armed groups (through kidnappings or killings), and researchers' very presence in the field may represent grave dangers to those they work or simply interact with. The chapters in Part II of this book contribute to discussions of the dilemmas of balancing restrictive ethics and risk assessments of ever more cautious universities with real risks and meaningful research in areas of international intervention (cf. also Bøås *et al.*, 2006; Kovats-Bernat, 2006).

Francesco Strazzari and Alessandra Russo lay the groundwork for this discussion by reflecting on more recent developments in the research ethics and risk assessment procedures of universities, research institutions and funding bodies in the Global North (Chapter 6). Drawing on their own research experiences as well as their involvement in projects addressing these institutional developments, the authors argue that there are two main tendencies negatively affecting research in violent and closed contexts: the securitization of ethics and risks and their bureaucratization and judiciarization. Their argument is that these two combined processes do not necessarily make research safer, as they are too rigid and uniform to be context-specifically meaningful,

but that they do restrict or prevent forms of much needed independent knowledge production on intervention politics in violent and/or illiberal settings (cf. also Bhattacharya, 2014).

Following directly on from this, John Heathershaw and Parviz Mullojonov illustrate the slippery slope that research in violent and closed contexts can be despite complying with the tight institutional ethics and risk assessment procedures of a UK university (Chapter 7). Employing the case of the detention of a Tajik researcher by Tajik security agencies, they discuss the limits of the procedural approach to research ethics and security currently employed by many universities in the Global North. Unpacking dilemmas such as researcher and research participant safety, on the one hand, and the questions of whether research should be conducted at all, on the other, or the dilemma of trade-offs between access and impartiality, they argue that conscious vocational engagement with the field can help make better choices, but that ultimately no approach—neither procedural nor vocational—can fully overcome the interlinked dilemmas explored.

What context-specific safety protocols and procedures of research in a highly violent context could look like is discussed by Boukary Sangaré and Jaimie Bleck (Chapter 8). The authors draw on their experience of conducting research in Central and Northern Mali across the lines of North–South collaboration (see also Bleck, Dendere and Sangaré, 2018), to discuss strategies of fieldwork in areas of armed conflict where the state has almost disappeared. They recommend close collaboration between foreign and local researchers and show that safety in high-risk contexts is dependent on up-to-date information from local networks that is continuously fed into the security assessment. They also caution that risk assessments will always have to consider the long-term effects of research, as violent situations can be highly volatile, making what was safe yesterday potentially dangerous tomorrow, for example if the power balance between armed factions in the research area changes.

Judith Verwejien (Chapter 9) further tackles the challenges of security in violent research contexts by offering in-depth insights into how she assessed security risks when she researched micro-dynamics of conflict in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The chapter goes into detail regarding practical forms of preparing for potential harm and how to avoid it, such as analyzing patterns of kidnappings or imaging an ambush and practising how to behave in such a situation. While acknowledging that security risks can never be eliminated, Verweijen's chapter also shows that

the combination of good security analysis and realistic preparations can help to minimize risk even in a highly violent context such as eastern DRC.

While many risk assessments at universities in the Global North revolve around the Northern researcher and their associates and participants, the wider and longer-term consequences of researcher behaviour in the field are less well considered or understood. Jesse Driscoll (Chapter 10) illuminates this question in the context of research in illiberal states. Employing a game-theoretical model drawing on extensive fieldwork experiences in Central Asia and the south Caucasus, he shows the stakes involved in the game for two types of players: a bureaucrat in the security sector of the state where the research is taking place and a researcher who wants to publish critical aspects of the politics of the state in question. By taking the reader through a set of situations in which the two players take different options of either escalating or ignoring the engagement with sensitive political issues, the chapter highlights the potential dangers of academic work that interprets the role of the researcher in an oppressive context also as that of a social and political activist.

The contributions to Part II of the book show that security and risk issues are real, and that in worst-case scenarios they can get researchers killed, like in the case of the Cambridge PhD student Giulio Regeni briefly discussed by Russo and Strazzari (Chapter 6) or detained by authoritarian states, as in the case of Alexander Sodiqov, discussed in detail by John Heathershaw and Parviz Mullojonov (Chapter 7). Questions of security and risk in intervention research should thus not be taken lightly, and 'non-events' not mistaken for general safety and lack of risk. However, what the authors also suggest is that the securitized, bureaucratized and judicialized measures to minimize risk and maximize ethical research are not fully suited to meet the challenges and dilemmas of fieldwork-based research in violent and closed contexts. Importantly, functioning security assessments are not based on static pre-fieldwork assessments, but on ongoing relationship-building and information-gathering on the ground, that is, among local communities and with the help of trusted local partners. Travel advice by European or US ministries of foreign affairs, on which much of universities' risk assessment is based, by contrast, appears to be less useful when it comes to tailored security assessments. The answer to security and detention risks cannot be to refrain from any research in 'difficult' geographical areas or on 'sensitive' political topics, as this would leave blank spaces on our social-scientific research maps. Rather,

security and risk assessments are crucial, but need to be contextualized, embedded and constantly updated to be meaningful.

Dilemmas around distance and closeness

The presence of international organizations and actors, both military and civilian, affects the extent to which the dilemmas of fieldwork-based intervention research play out in the research process or can be addressed by the researcher. This dynamic is an integral element of what we call the challenges and dilemmas of distance and closeness, which arise in different forms that are discussed in the contribution to Part III of this book.

These challenges refer, first, to the negotiations of identity and positionality that take place during fieldwork. Gender, culture, educational and professional backgrounds, and so on, can be factors contributing to closeness as well as distance between researcher and researched, and the boundaries can shift not only from one field to another, but also from one situation to another in the same field. Maria-Louise Clausen reflects on questions of distance and closeness during fieldwork in Yemen's capital Sana'a (Chapter 11). Drawing on Schwedler's (2006) idea of a 'third gender', she discusses the balancing of security concerns with being a white female researcher in a highly conservative Islamic context. Clausen's experience is that what appear to be binary categories, such as the male–female gender bias expected to shape conservative society, may be more nuanced at the interplay of gender and nationality. Where different elements of the researcher's and her interlocutor's identity intersect, her positionality as 'insider' or 'outsider' may be less clear-cut than assumed, with similar educational careers and other markers of cosmopolitanism sometimes creating more commonalities across national borders than within them. Performances of identity are important in these negotiations of positionality, but their possibility space is also to some extent shaped by the context of the international intervention: no matter how independent outside researchers actually are from international organizations and agencies operating in the country, they will to some extent always be seen as somehow part of the intervention—shaping research relationships beyond their control.

Some forms of distance between researcher and researched are created by academic research itself, which can be seen as a form of intervention, as Daniela Lai argues for the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Chapter 12). Research-as-intervention has consequences for what can be researched and how since, just like political and military

intervention, the intervention by academia shapes the very field it sets out to research. Lai discusses on the one hand how the over-research certain areas of Bosnian society are experiencing due to academic biases leads to distancing. A second form of distancing concerns those communities, groups and topics that are sidelined by intervention research, either because they are not the focus of the military and political interventions—a consequence of many scholars' unfortunate propensity to adopt the agendas of their field of study—or because they do not align with academic trends and conjunctures. Thus, even in the seemingly most over-researched post-/conflict societies there are people, places and problems that are curiously absent and distant from fieldwork-based research.

Distances between researcher and research participants are also created through physical access restrictions to the field, which may arise either from the dangers of an active conflict—which shaped Mateja Peter's research in Darfur, Sudan (Chapter 13)—or from travel restrictions for foreigners put in place by the host country of the research—as in the case of a project on conflict-affected communities in Myanmar discussed by Katarina Kušić (Chapter 14). The physical distance from the field is overcome in these examples in two different ways: in the first case through embedded research with the UN mission in Darfur, in the second case though working with Burmese research associates to implement the fieldwork-based components in foreign travel-restricted areas. In the case of Darfur discussed by Peter, embedded research as a strategy to overcome the physical distance to the field paradoxically creates such a close relationship with one particular actor (here: an armed actor) that this restricts what can be researched at the same time as it enables the research in the first place. The result is often 'good enough' research, which is better than no research at all, but far from the ideal of independent fieldwork. In the second case, the research 'by proxy' in Myanmar discussed by Kušić, the help of local associates is able to overcome the physical distance created by a controlling state and has advantages in terms of cultural closeness between researchers and researched; yet at the same time the fact that the commissioning researchers are not present during the fieldwork severely curbs their ability to follow up on interesting observations in the process and limits what they can safely infer from the generated data—in addition to the potential danger of putting local associates at risk.

With the tendency towards more restrictive ethics and risk assessment procedures at universities and research institutions in the Global North, and a general reluctance among Northern funders to directly support researchers in the Global South, it is to be feared that these

'good-enough', 'remote' and 'proxy' forms of research will only become more prevalent in future, raising questions about our academic knowledge and the expert advice to intervening agencies based on it (cf. Duffield, 2014; Perera, 2017b). The only antidote to this is at least that we are aware of the pitfalls that such strategies contain.

Sensitivities of research with vulnerable or marginalized participants

The last type of practical challenges and ethical dilemmas in intervention research discussed in this book revolves around fieldwork with marginalized or vulnerable participants. There are several groups in intervened societies that qualify as marginalized or vulnerable, due to violence, poverty or other risky and precarious circumstances shaping their daily lives. Of the many types of research with vulnerable participants in areas of intervention, Part IV of this book concentrates on two issues in particular: research on sexual and gender-based violence and on violently displaced persons and refugees. Research with marginalized or vulnerable participants warrants a specific sensitivity that accounts for human suffering, while refraining from infantilizing 'victims' by ignoring their agency, or drawing generalizing conclusions about 'perpetrators' by missing out on nuances and counterexamples (for example, Boeston and Henry, 2018; Eriksson Baaz, Gray and Stern, 2018).

Research on wartime and intervention-related sexual violence has become an important subfield of conflict and intervention studies. In this book, it is addressed from three perspectives. Kathleen Jennings discusses the practicalities and ethics of research among sex workers as part of wider peacekeeping economies (Chapter 15). Reflecting on her research among sex workers in Liberia and the DRC, she observes a worrying proliferation of research with 'victim-survivors' of wartime sexual violence, and calls on researchers' ethical obligation to interrogate themselves and their motives when deciding to interview members of vulnerable groups. Jennings also critically examines the ways and limits of empathic research among vulnerable subjects and addresses practical questions of access to and compensation for research participants.

Angela Muvumba Sellström (Chapter 16) reflects on three ethical dilemmas of conducting research on 'non-cases' of wartime sexual violence, that is, among armed groups that have regulated sex in wartime conduct. First, a focus on the non-use of sex as a weapon of war may exculpate these groups also from other human rights violations they may have committed. Second, while these groups have regulated sexual conduct, there may still be some sexual violence survivors who

are unwittingly silenced by such a research focus. Third, as the regulation of sexual conduct may be based on male leadership of the armed group rather than female sexual autonomy, such regulations may foster entrenched gender inequalities in society.

Henri Myrttinen (Chapter 17) discusses the problems of conducting research on the perpetrators of sexual exploitation and abuse in peacekeeping missions, arising from regulatory and definitional grey areas and the difficulties of triangulating data on these sensitive topics. He relates that while stories abound, much of the information is shared in the form of innuendo, rumours and stereotyping urban legends, which are hard to verify and follow their own logic. The chapter discusses how this research situation can be navigated and what can be known and written. In the last contribution to this part, Ingunn Bjørkhaug also reflects on a research that raised problems of rumours and unverifiable stories, albeit in a different context. Her fieldwork took place among refugees in a camp in Uganda, where studying sexual violence and exploitation was not the aim of the study, but where these topics surged continuously without solicitation in interviews and focus groups in what she later understood to be a competition for resettlement prospects (Chapter 18). Bjørkhaug reflects on how research participants' agency to engage in strategic storytelling influenced the collection of data, what it revealed about the larger context of life in the refugee camp, and how she dealt with the permanent exposure to stories of human suffering.

There are several themes that arise from these different chapters that researchers need to think through in fieldwork with marginalized or vulnerable groups. One is the power of bureaucratic processes and categories. In Myrttinen's contribution, rigid definitions and theorizations of sexual exploitation and abuse in peacekeeping missions leave many areas of transactional body politics unaccounted for and create unequal regulations for different types of interveners. For example, while soldiers' sexual conduct may be sanctioned, civilian interveners' conduct may not, and it is seldom the most severe cases of sexual violence that are actually investigated and prosecuted. The power of administrative categories and procedures is also clear in Bjørkhaug's chapter, where the criteria and interview process for refugee resettlement into third countries shaped to large extents the narratives of the research participants in view of a rumour that her research may be part of this process. In both cases, the power of categorizations does not just impact on research subjects' lives; it impacts directly on the research itself, on how the researcher is perceived, which data can be generated, and what possible conclusions can be drawn from the fieldwork material.

As Bjørkhaug elaborates in detail, the dilemma is that this context is largely beyond the researchers influence, while shaping the fieldwork to a large extent.

Categories' power often stems from the privileges they allow or deny access to—there is something at stake in struggles over categories, and this affects research. Money can have similar effects, as Jennings discusses (in Chapter 15; see also Bøås, Chapter 5; Molony and Hammett, 2007; Vanderstaay, 2015). While paying participants in cash or kind for their time is a common practice and can be handled in ethical ways, the availability of research money can nonetheless create a research economy for gatekeepers, brokers and research participants. Jennings also discusses how the researcher can find out about and act upon such participation for money in the process of interviewing, but without putting the vulnerable research participants on the spot, thereby acknowledging the socioeconomic opportunity structures the very research creates.

This links with a third area of challenges in research with marginal or vulnerable groups and on topics of sexual and gender-based violence, namely how to maintain a critical and nuanced view on topics that may be highly distressing and how to avoid marginalizing some groups or individuals further. Muvumba Sellström's research explicitly brings such nuance into the study of wartime sexual violence through a research focus on armed groups that have regulated sexual conduct. Her chapter also discusses how such counterexamples bear a similar danger of missing out on nuances as the mainstream literature does, for example by marginalizing some cases of rape or condoning paternalistic attitudes. Myrttinen's chapter similarly reminds us how difficult it may be to remain open and maintain nuance in research when faced with the perpetrators of acts (short of criminal ones) that the researcher normatively rejects—how to show empathy with research participants who are openly misogynist, racist or sexist? Another major challenge of research among marginalized and vulnerable participants is to balance empathy with all research subjects and ethical fieldwork practice with the researcher's critical and normative research aims (see all chapters in this part).

In the conclusions to this book, we—the editors—return to some additional themes that arise from the chapters and that we think constitute ten points all academics planning fieldwork-based research on international intervention in violent or closed contexts should consider before they leave for whatever field they deem central to their research. We have consciously refrained from formulating 'lessons learned'. If there is one central lesson to this book, it is that there are no easy or

universal answers to the questions raised by the authors. Rather, what we need is a flexible practice around central areas of concern, which avoids the mistakes made by others, while paying attention to the volatility, context-specificity and long-term and wider effects of research in violent or illiberal contexts. This discussion has to be continuous, and it has only just started.

Notes

[1] Feminist scholarship is certainly a welcome exception here, as it recognizes and centrally writes into its texts the partly understood and unfamiliar, rather than glossing it over; however, embracing messiness as productive opportunity is not easy while actually doing the fieldwork. For a useful overview of feminist methodologies for the study of war, see Wibben (2016).

[2] For first-person accounts of experiences with specific methods in peace and conflict research, see MacGinty, Vogel and Brett (2020).

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PART I

Control and confusion

There is an idea inherent in a lot of advice on and critique of fieldwork-based research in areas of violent conflict and international intervention that the (Northern/outside) researcher is generally in control of the research process. Contributions to this first part of the book raise serious questions about this idea. Four authors reflect on misunderstandings in the research process and the confusions that have arisen during their specific researches. They discuss the effects such confusions have had on them as researchers, including a range of emotions such as frustration, anger, bewilderment and self-doubt, which are seldom discussed in academic outputs. They also address what effects misunderstandings and confusions had on others, especially research assistants and research participants or informants, but also the wider communities in which they have carried out their research (most seriously, for example, putting them in danger). From a recognition that the researcher is not always in control of the research, the authors develop strategies of how to mitigate the risks for themselves and others emanating from questions of control and confusion. Examples in this part are taken from fieldwork interactions with international intervention elites in Bosnia and Herzegovina; interpretivist research on the US Africa Command (AFRICOM) in Germany, Mali and Niger; oral history research with Soviet–Afghan War veterans in Tajikistan; and reflections relating to research relationships between a Northern conflict researcher and his Malian research partners in areas of high insecurity in the African Sahel zone.