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Spring 2024 | Volume 22.1

Table of Contents

QMMR Qualitative & Multi-Method Research

Spring 2024 | Volume 22.1

Notes from the Field

QMMR Qualitative & Multi-Method Research

Letter from the Editors

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We are happy to publish a new issue of QMMR, our fourth as editors. We are going public with a fresh look. The underlying reason for this saddens us. Our previous typesetter and graphic designer, Tony Aronica, passed away suddenly earlier this year. We take this opportunity to thank Tony for his excellent work over the last few years and extend our sincere condolences to his family and friends. Valeria Goldsztein has now joined the QMMR team from Buenos Aires. She has a done a fantastic job redesigning the publication on very short notice and will be typesetting our issues from now on. Welcome on board! We would also like to thank Nuffield College for generously funding the publication's new design.

As field researchers ourselves, seeing the current issue organically become a "fieldwork issue" was very exciting. In the following pages, you will find serious efforts to think and rethink fieldwork from multiple angles. First, we feature a symposium, edited by Kristin Eck, on reflexivity. While much has been written on reflexivity, including articles in past QMMR issues, contributions to this symposium really push the boundaries. Their reflections cut across subfields, epistemologies, and methodological approaches, and, perhaps most importantly, move the discussion "from theory to practice." This symposium is truly "all things 'doing reflexivity'." An important addition to an important literature.

This issue also comes with two original articles. In the first, Julia Zulver and her team discuss topics related to digital fieldwork, which has increasingly become part of our toolkit, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. As if this was not enough of an invitation for field researchers to think outside

of the box, the authors reflect on how to bring feminist and decolonial approaches into how we collect data digitally. By reflecting on their experience in a project that interviewed 100 at-risk women activists online across various Latin American countries, they show us that it is possible to bring feminist and decolonial practices to studies exploring sensitive issues and to inject "closeness" into distant, online data collection processes.

Continuing the conversation on collecting data in the field, the second article by Ozlem Tuncel focuses on elite interviewing. Noting that specific training on how to interview elites is often missing in Ph.D. training, she draws on her experience interviewing politicians, government officials, and political party leaders in Turkey for her dissertation work. Her piece offers a great deal of advice addressing a wide range of issues, including but not limited to arranging interviews, positionality of the researcher, and interview organization and preparation. Like the symposium on reflexivity, this piece is as practical as it gets!

We close this issue with a fascinating Note from the Field that, in many ways, pulls together the themes featured in the rest of the issue: fieldwork, reflexivity, interviews, and high-risk environments. Jiuen Baek walks us through how she navigated the terrains of Burma trying to understand what motivates first movers to express dissent in authoritarian regimes. Readers will not only learn about her inspiring and relevant work but also how to think about positionality in light of the challenges she did anticipate and those she didn't.

We regret that this issue is seeing the light without a Note from the Classroom. Our bad. We promise we will compensate for this flaw in our following issues.

Before we let you scroll down the issue and learn from these great contributions, we would like to reiterate our usual call to all members of the QMMR community to submit original articles, symposia, and notes from the field and classroom for our consideration. Articles and symposia will be typically peer-reviewed, whereas we will review notes in-house. You can find details about submission guidelines on our website: https://www.qmmrpublication.com

See you at APSA2024, where we will host our regular reception. If not coming to Philly, see you in our next issue!

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Symposium: Reflexivity from Theory to Practice

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Reflexivity from Theory to Practice: Introduction to the Symposium

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This symposium aims to help researchers across subfields, epistemologies, and methodological approaches not only understand the importance of reflexivity, but how to apply it in practice. Reflexivity represents a basic, foundational idea: our identity as researchers matters for the validity, outcome, and ethics of our research. For the researcher, reflexivity entails thinking about oneself, one's thinking, and one's actions and how they affect the research lifecycle (Ben-Ari 2014, 30). Reflexivity requires that the researcher take seriously both the dynamic nature of the research process and the intersectional identities of researcher and respondent, alike. It also requires acknowledging, throughout the research process, the ways our research and analysis might be (or has been) shaped by our intersectional identities and those of our research participants (Soedirgo and Glas 2020; Thomas 2018), by our personal behavior and interactions, and by our ideas, thought processes, socialization into specific disciplinary cultures and traditions, and language (Alejandro and Knott 2022). Reflexivity thus entails reflecting on how particular contingent and contextual factors within and outside of our control might have shaped the research process, and how to deal with them. Some aspects of reflexivity are outside of our control (like how the research subjects perceive us), while others are components we can change, contain, emphasize, and mitigate. We should become more aware of both and practice reflexivity with the goal of conducting ethically sound, respectful, and rigorous reflexive research.

Reflexivity also extends to language, not only as language per se, but in the sense that "how [researchers speak] about the world contributes to the shaping of this world" (Alejandro and Knott 2022, 3). We are all conducting research from our specific disciplinary standpoints and contributing in different ways the social sciences' "shaping [of]

social reality and hierarchies" (Leander 2002 in Alejandro and Knott 2022, 4). Practicing reflexivity may also help us become aware of the processes of knowledge production that contribute to the reproduction of more or less hidden hierarchies (see for instance Alejandro 2018). The papers in this symposium underscore that the ambit for reflexivity is far broader than has been previously understood, pushing back against a pervasive assumption amongst some scholars that reflexive practices are only relevant—or even appropriate—for research orientations that embrace subjectivity, such as constructivism, interpretivism, critical theory, and postmodernism. We argue that reflexivity should be understood as essential to *all* kinds of research, including but not limited to fieldwork, on both ethical and methodological grounds. Our symposium rests primarily on the contributions of researchers doing fieldwork, but this conversation aims to reach all kinds of research. Recent research has highlighted the ethical challenges of doing archival research and desk-based work utilizing social media datasets or preexisting datasets (Hoover Green and Cohen 2021; Subotić 2021), and a growing debate in neighboring disciplines suggest that reflexivity is required not only when working directly with human subjects. Without an awareness of the power relations into which one enters as a researcher, one may misjudge the risk of harm from our research (Mwambari 2019). Reflexivity's requirement that the researcher assess power relations relative to others is thus an integral tool for ethical research practice.

We aim to raise awareness of the importance of reflexivity as an endeavor that is not specific to one methodology or one epistemology. Further work may engage more systematically with the nuances of how to apply reflexivity in more difficult or rare situations, such as when quantitative work tries to incorporate interpretivist principles and practices (English and Nielsen 2022). Across research approaches, however, reflexive assessment of power and practices also generates crucial meta-knowledge about the research process, providing analytical leverage that can improve the quality of research and the transparency of the research process. Even in a positivistic framework, failure to consider approaches abandoned or not taken and failing to account for researchers' choices at different junctures in the research process introduces bias (Bond 2018; Thomas 2018).

There are five papers in this symposium. The first, Eck and Lanigan, focuses on strategies for "doing" reflexivity, offering several suggestions for structuring the process of reflexivity, while also underscoring the need for the individual researcher to adjudicate as to which facets of this process are relevant for their particular project. Thaler then discusses the practicalities of reflexivity and openness during the research process and when presenting or publishing research, focusing on tensions between ideals of transparency and the ethical, personal, and professional risks researchers confront. Ruffa addresses reflexivity in elite contexts, in which power differentials are not as clear-cut as when studying vulnerable populations. Her contribution problematizes how to practice reflexivity within those contexts, including how to navigate elite relations, how to identify and engage with pockets of vulnerabilities, and how to use with integrity the power the researcher retains. Bjarnegård reflects on how to achieve reflexivity in output (i.e., in scholarly writing), starting with the observation that even when reflexivity is practiced in the research process it is not necessarily adequately reflected and communicated in subsequent scholarly publications. This article underscores the need for gatekeepers like reviewers and editors to encourage and enable such reflection. Finally, Campbell discusses how reflexivity throughout the research process enables researchers to understand both the ethical obligation of giving back to the communities they research and the best means of ethical policy engagement.

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Doing Reflexivity

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All human interactions contain some element of power relations. In the context of social science research in which researchers seek to obtain information from research participants, these power relations are readily apparent. Who asks the questions and who answers? Do rules around the setting and which questions may be posed situate the researcher in a position of weakness, as is often the case with researching political elites (Ruffa, this symposium)? Or is the researcher in a position of power, able to induce participation by virtue of vast systemic imbalances embedded in research structures, framings, and identities?

The literature on research ethics within the social sciences discusses these issues of power relations in terms of *positionality*. This literature challenges us to think about the fluid and complex nature of positionality, going beyond a surface level examination of the researcher's identities—such as nationality, race, ethnicity, religion, social class, family, gender, education, ideology, prior experience, research background, and other elements of their social biography—to consider the way these exist within both context specific and larger systems of social stratification via intersectional analysis.[1] The process of assessing what our positions are as researchers, and what power relations exist between ourselves and research participants as a consequence of our relative positions is termed *reflexivity*.[2]

There is a vast literature on reflexivity across the social sciences. In many respects this literature is daunting in its complexity and abstraction. There is little consensus on what reflexivity *is*; sometimes it is understood as an epistemological assumption, sometimes as a method, and sometimes as a practice. We focus here on the practice of reflexivity. The reflexive turn across the social sciences has encouraged scholars to embrace the practice of assessing positionality and power, but, with some exceptions, the literature provides little guidance about the practicalities of reflexive practices. How does one actually *do* reflexivity? In this article, we foreground some tools and strategies for engaging in reflexivity, while also warning against treating reflexivity as a checklist which is superficially performed for research audiences (see Thaler, this symposium). Our primary audience is students and scholars who are new to reflexivity and are seeking advice on how to get started and how to structure their work.

1 The literature stresses the importance of intersectional analysis in this endeavor, arguing that simplified insider/outsider dichotomies are reductive; scholars positioned as insiders on one dimension (e.g., class or race or education) may be outsiders on other dimensions; insider status can be an asset as well as a liability in the research process. Though social bonds may provide entry points, they do not automatically mitigate the power dynamics of research, and being an outsider on certain dimensions does not beget neutrality or objectivity.

2 For a bibliography on reflexivity and positionality in contentious politics research, see https://advancingconflictresearch.com/identity

The Utility of Reflexivity

We understand reflexivity as part of the entire human participant research process, from conceptualization and preparation to data gathering, to analysis and presentation of the findings (Berger 2015).[3] The ambit for reflexivity is far broader than typically understood, for both methodological and ethical reasons (Bond 2018; Thomas 2018). Because reflexivity has been an integral part of interpretivist and post-positivist scholarship, it is fair to ask whether reflexivity is antithetical to objectivity.[4]

We argue, on the contrary, that reflexivity can increase objectivity by increasing the data available to the researcher in their analysis because it provides a means to generate information on the research process itself. Seen this way, the observations the researcher makes about power relations and how they influence the research setting can serve as valuable metadata (Bond 2018; Thomas 2018). Metadata is data about data, including its origins. The type of metadata generated by reflexive engagement can be used to nuance and contextualize the analysis, arguably improving its validity by taking into consideration the many non-textual aspects of the context in which the data were collected. When a scholar conducts an interview while engaging in reflexivity, they will have not only the text from the interview transcripts available for analysis, but will also be equipped to consider, for example, the way that information was framed or whether information may have been withheld.

In quantitative methodologies, we often speak of this as the data generation process, where the aim is to understand why some data are made public and can therefore be collected and coded into a dataset, while other data remain obscure or unknown. For example, in the field of civil war studies, scholars have examined which sorts of violent events become public—and are therefore included in datasets—and which do not, as a way to consider data quality and the risk for introducing bias into statistical analyses (Dietrich and Eck 2020). In a qualitative setting, the data generation process can consist of, for example, the interaction with a research participant (e.g., an interview or focus group). Engaging in reflexivity prompts the researcher to consider more than just what is being said, but also to consider possible motivations for saying it, as well as motivations for omission. Similarly, in quantitative datasets, researchers may create precision codes, which quantify the level of uncertainty the researcher has about the accuracy of a datapoint. This data can then be used both to refine the researcher's analysis and communicate with other users of the data. In a qualitative setting, the active reflection required when engaging in reflexivity offers analogous opportunities for the researcher to qualify uncertainty or risk for bias in the information provided by human participants. As in quantitative settings, the researcher can then use this form of metadata to refine and enrichen their analysis. It also offers opportunities to increase transparency about the investigative process.

Beyond its methodological advantages, there is also the issue of research ethics. We may misjudge the risk for harm from our research without an awareness of the power relations into which one enters as a researcher (Mwambari 2019). Understanding how contexts and identities impact the prospects for adverse outcomes means that reflexive assessments of power and positionality also serve as integral tools for ethical research practice.

A major obstacle to providing generalized advice on how to go about reflexivity, however, is the vast diversity of contexts in which researchers

3 Reflexivity is a tool that can be applied to a wide array of research methods, qualitative and quantitative. Nor is reflexivity in qualitative research confined to human participant research; it can also be useful in archival work, desk studies, text analysis, and other qualitative techniques. We focus here on reflexivity in the context of human participant research for pragmatic reasons. Above all, the stakes are arguably the highest in human participant research when it comes to the risk for harm. This article was also motivated to meet the needs of our students who wish to conduct human participant research using reflexive tools.

4 To be clear: our focus is not on combining ontological perspectives like interpretivism and positivism (e.g., English and Nielsen 2022). We argue rather that reflexivity is itself a tool, the utility of which is not constrained to a single ontological perspective.

work. It is daunting to consider how researcher and participant-related identities will play out in different contexts for different individuals. Much of the literature on reflexivity and positionality naturally reflects the personal experiences that the authors face as a result of their identities, the identities of their respondents, and the context in which their work is conducted. This literature is enormously diverse and inspiring, but there is a disinclination to provide general advice beyond the admonishment to be aware of positionality and to engage in reflexive assessments as preparation for fieldwork. Notable exceptions include Berger (2015), Finlay (2002), Olmos-Vega et al. (2023), and Soedirgo and Glas (2020).

While researchers must take responsibility for the deep work that is required for meaningful reflexive practice, our aim is to provide inspiration for that process. There is no single way to *do* reflexivity (Thaler, this symposium), and reflexivity is not a remedy for fundamentally uneven power dynamics in research (Bouka 2018). Learning to recognize subjectivity and bias and better account for it can draw attention to the power disparities in research relationships and can improve the research itself (Väyrynen et al. 2021). Yet reflexivity need not be totally individualized, and in an ideal world, scholars could draw on the deep pool of experience with reflexivity across international studies. In this article, we aim to contribute to creating such an inclusionary community for practicing reflexivity and provide some suggestions on how to structure this work, including structured reflexive journaling and de-centering the researcher. We also share some common pitfalls in this process. In our online appendix, the reader will find a list of questions compiled from the reflexivity literature that may be helpful in this endeavor.

We suggest that it is important to discuss the practice of reflexivity in practical terms because in our experience, many students and researchers struggle with how to engage with the process itself. A recurring criticism of reflexivity is that it tends towards an undue focus on the researcher. This is indeed a risk when reflexivity is practiced superficially, to check off a box to satisfy external auditors of one's research output (Thaler, this symposium). In many pieces, reflexivity starts and ends with a paragraph stating one's identity as a researcher, and is not analytically revisited (Bjarnegård, this symposium). But to dismiss reflexivity because it has been poorly practiced is to ignore the larger underlying issue: that reflexivity is occasionally practiced (or reported) in a shallow manner suggests that social scientists lack training and guidance in the practice of reflexivity itself. To change that, we need more discussions and debates in the field that center the practicalities of reflexive analysis.

Structured Reflexive Journaling

Building on Soedirgo and Glass (2020), we suggest that structured reflexive journaling offers a foundation on which researchers can build a dynamic reflexive practice. While qualitative researchers are accustomed to taking field notes which include reflections on the research process, what we propose is a more structured activity. Positionality is fluid, shifting across time, space, and social interactions. Structured journaling centers these fluid temporal dynamics by proposing that the researcher create a set of guiding questions about positionality to consider—across levels of analysis and across time.

Because reflexivity centers human interaction—preparing for it, engaging in it, learning from it, reporting on it, and contextualizing information acquired in the process of it—it typically occurs at multiple levels of analysis: one can assess oneself ("personal reflexivity"); the participant(s) or data encountered; dyadic power relations ("interpersonal reflexivity"); and the setting in which the interaction occurs, including the power structures in which the interaction is embedded ("contextual reflexivity") (Olmos-Vega et al. 2023).[5]

5 Olmos-Vega et al. (2023) also discuss "methodological reflexivity," which considers the researcher's epistemological perspective and the resulting methodological decisions that are taken. There are numerous other categorizations of reflexivity to be found in the literature.

This means that the researcher can engage in reflexivity at multiple levels of analysis and at multiple points in time. Figure 1 provides an example of how researchers might structure this work. Each cell can be populated with the questions the researcher thinks relevant to pose at that juncture. Which questions are of greatest relevance may change over the course of the research process. In the online appendix, we have compiled over 100 questions from the reflexivity literature (and formulated some of our own) to provide a starting place for this work. These questions should not be understood as fixed guidelines but rather as a pool of previous experience from which researchers can draw on in their own work.[6] Some questions may resonate with a researcher, while others may seem pointless or unhelpful; the point is not that all of these questions must be asked, but that they serve as a resource for researchers to pull from and build on as they wish in their own reflexive practice.

Figure 1. Example Structure

	Self	(Each) participant	Dyadic relations	Context
Preparation				
Outset of data collection				
After interactions or at pre-set times				
After data collection				
During analysis				
For presentation				
Throughout				

Some questions might be returned to iteratively after new interactions to calibrate whether new insights have been gleaned. Others might be relevant only for certain stages of the research process. While researchers should establish a set of guiding questions in the planning stage, these are usually revised and supplemented as the research process unfolds and new issues emerge. Researchers commonly engage informally in this type of updating as they learn more about the context in which they operate, but these insights are rarely recorded. Reflexive journaling offers a structure to make visible to the researcher these considerations. Adding these steps creates more labor, but it also creates opportunities to improve the work and to gain insights prompting the researcher to re-visit and re-consider how the research is being conducted. The temporal cues that we propose in Figure 1 are only suggestions; for some projects, reflexivity may be a continuous process, while in others, it may be punctuated by critical reflexive junctures.[7]

This documentation may also be useful to the researcher when analyzing and presenting the research in written form (Bjarnegård, this symposium), since it serves as a reminder of the metadata relating to positionality and power that were collected alongside the topical information the researcher gathered. This can facilitate an interpretation of the data in light of power relations, for example, by thinking more critically about pauses and hesitations, where questions were sidestepped, and how what is said reflects or diverges from common narratives (Fujii 2010). Revisiting this material in later stages can facilitate nuanced analysis and interpretation as the researcher communicates their findings to a variety of venues (Campbell, this symposium). That said, we do not take a position on whether reflexive practices *should* be reported in published work. Some researchers may be uncomfortable with discussing their identities in publication, for a variety of personal or professional reasons. Our focus here is on reflexive practice, not on the question of how much, if any, of that work enters the public domain.

6 Over-standardization can be damaging if the researcher treats it solely as a tool to validate conclusions and safeguard against criticism.

7 We are grateful to Sarah Parkinson for this insight.

Decentering Ourselves

As we've seen, the existing literature provides us with examples of how to reflect on our roles and identities, and how to consider what privileges and risks these confer for ourselves and research participants. But there is an important "known unknown" in this equation: how do the others involved in research understand positionality and power?

Human participant research involves not only oneself, the participant, and the context, but also various research associates involved in a given interaction, for example, translators, research assistants, enumerators, and "fixers" or other middlemen who introduce the researcher to the participant. The researcher must consider the interpersonal dynamics between all of those involved to fully appreciate the power dynamics of a given interaction; each additional person involved in a research encounter impacts on the reflexive environment and increases the complexity of assessing positionality (Malejacq and Mukhopadhyay 2016).

For example, what sort of identities are signaled by a translator? What social status do they have (and is reflected in their language), how embedded are they in a given community, and how might these factors impact on participants' comfort or concerns about repercussions? Who set up the interaction? What are their identities, and what are the social power dynamics that inform their relations with the participant? Are there bonds of reciprocity or patronage? What debts are being paid and what are being made by virtue of arranging this interaction? What risks might be present for research participants and associates, and how might these shift with different interactions and contexts? Many of these concerns may be familiar even from quantitative, positivist research settings. For example, survey researchers often tackle the question of who to hire as enumerators, especially in divided societies.[8] How might enumerators' gender, ethnic or racial identity (or other social cues, like being a university student) influence respondents' willingness to participate in a survey and the answers which they provide (e.g., pose a risk for social desirability bias or other data quality issues). The nature of survey research means that scholars must anticipate these issues and plan for them in advance, including exploring them through pilot studies. Enumerators themselves are often the first to identify issues relating to how prospective respondents respond to enumerator identities. Indeed, many researchers have de facto engaged in reflexivity, even if they do not realize it.

The idea of "decentering" means recognizing the fact that the research participants and associates can contribute to the reflexive process itself (MacLean 2013; Malejacq and Mukhopadhyay 2016; Mwambari 2019). Co-construction of knowledge is a common idea in participatory methodologies, which seek to create a collaborative dialogue that acknowledges and partially mitigates (but can never truly flatten) the hierarchies between researcher and others (Bouka 2018; Finlay 2002). Decentering the researcher provides an opening for reflexivity as a shared enterprise extending beyond the researcher's own horizon and recognizing that participants also reflexively consider researchers and research associates as they navigate power dynamics embedded in the research process.

Likewise, research associates can also inform reflexive assessments. Indeed, reflexivity can be embedded in the process as a team activity, for example, by soliciting feedback on the research journal from research associates. Associates can not only share their own insights; they can be resources for triangulating reflexive assessments participants (Malejacq and Mukhopadhyay 2016). Where do associates disagree (with each other, the participant, or the researcher) about power relations? Probing these issues explicitly may help researchers to identify blind spots as well as recognize and mitigate previous assumptions.

Beyond involving research participants and associates, researchers may also solicit feedback

8 Many of these points are also applicable to other forms of quantitative data collected from human participants, such as field experiments.

from outside of the research environment, for example, through a peer support network of others with contextual expertise. By virtue of their remove from the immediate research environment, these peers may provide useful perspective and advice on the reflexive process. Scholars can draw on conversations with mentors, students, colleagues, and friends to advance their reflexive thinking. At the same time, we acknowledge that this practice can come with a certain degree of privilege, and that there are power relations within academic communities which may influence scholars' ability to engage in reflexive practices. That reflexivity is becoming increasingly visible in international studies, however, allows scholars to also tap into a broader knowledge base.

But it is important not to go into these discussions naïvely, under the assumption that by virtue of this collaboration power disparities are erased and the risks involved in operating within these larger unequal structures are mitigated (Bouka 2018). In these dialogues, researchers must ask themselves: how are contextual power dynamics likely to impact on the associates' and participants' ability to speak freely? This is especially important to consider in contexts where associates are asked to engage in the reflexive process as part of their work on a project. Ascertaining the true opinions of research associates and participants poses methodological and ethical challenges, particularly in situations of power imbalance where participants and associates may be disincentivized to openly share their reflections with the researcher (Mwambari 2019). Decentering does not automatically disrupt these power dynamics, and at times can serve to strengthen them when the decentering process is extractive or invasive (Bouka 2018; Finlay 2002). To some degree these problems may be insurmountable, but self-conscious and critical decentering provides a starting point to probe ways to include others in the reflexive process, with an awareness of the limitations born of the fact that it is the researcher who ultimately has the power to decide which perspectives are considered (Finlay 2002).[9]

Concluding Remarks

This article argues that reflexive analysis can improve the quality of human participant research in both methodological and ethical terms, regardless of the researcher's epistemological perspective. Even those with positivist, objective aims can benefit from engaging in reflexivity. To structure reflexive analyses and to trace their evolution across the research process is to provide texture and nuance to the data collected, and to work actively to prevent harm to participants.

There are many pitfalls to navigate, including superficiality, self-centeredness, unresolvable complexity, and the appearance of a single "true" account. Reflexivity seems a rather daunting task, and there is no single way to "do" reflexivity. Indeed, the reflexivity literature proposes a multitude of different, and often conflicting, visions for what reflexivity even means for knowledge production. We deliberately sidestep these debates, to focus instead on introducing the benefits of reflexivity to readers who may not be familiar with them, and to provide suggestions on how to get started with the nuts and bolts of reflexive practice for those who do not have training in this approach. We also stress that while we have focused on research with human participants, many of the points we make are applicable to a broader set of data collection strategies. We encourage future research to continue to build on the pool of questions we collected in the online appendix, to create adaptable and flexible resources for people wishing to take the first steps in research reflexivity.

9 We are reminded that empathy does not equalize relationships, and research will always be embedded in power dynamics; involving respondents in reflexivity is not automatically empowering.

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Reflexivity and Openness in Conducting and Presenting Research: What Should We Share and When?

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Across methods and epistemologies, there has been a growing recognition in political science that reflexivity should be actively practiced throughout the process of trying to conduct rigorous, ethical research (Baron and Young 2022; Brigden and Gohdes 2020; Krystalli et al. 2021; Mosley 2013; Shepherd 2023; Soedirgo and Glas 2020). However, the general goals of reflexivity and open discussion about positionality and ethical questions raise questions about how to put principles into practice (Jacobs et al. 2021; Eck and Lanigan, this symposium). This piece explores what information researchers might be expected to share with research participants and with academic and practice audiences in the pursuit of reflexivity and openness, and when there might be good reasons to hold back in discussing particular identities, experiences, or decisions. Good faith efforts to practice reflexivity and openness will look different across research approaches, settings, and individuals, so we must defer to researchers to decide what makes ethical and practical sense.

Reflexivity and discussions of positionality throughout the social sciences have most often been pursued and valued in qualitative, interpretivist, and post-positivist research (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2017; Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006). Recent work, however, has pointed out benefits of reflexivity within positivist frameworks used by quantitative researchers (Bell-Martin and Marston 2021; Bond 2018). Reflexivity helps "fill in the 'whys'" (Haas and Hoebbel 2018) of quantitative research, making clear the many decisions that go into conceptualization, research design, coding, implementation and analysis, and presentation of findings (Lakew 2017).[10]

Alongside calls for reflexivity, efforts to promote "open science" and greater research transparency across all methodological approaches—exemplified in political science and international relations by the Data Access and Research Transparency (DA-RT) initiative (Golder and Golder 2016; Jacobs et al. 2021; Lupia and Elman 2014)—might be taken to demand "radical honesty" (Yom 2018) about how research was conducted, including discussing positionality and personal factors that shaped the research process. Yet being transparent about one's perceptions, identities, and experiences often is not the best practice while conducting research, especially on sensitive subjects and in violent settings (see e.g,. Arjona, Mampilly, and Pearlman 2018; Thaler 2021; Tripp 2018), and it can carry ethical, personal, and professional risks when presenting and publishing research for academic or public/policy audiences.

Against the push for transparency, scholars have advanced the idea of "reflexive openness" (Kapiszewski and Wood 2022; MacLean et al. 2019; Thomson 2021), calling for researchers to engage in sustained reflection and discussion of interactions with research participants and the research environment, and their efforts to maintain ethical practices through the research and publication process. Maclean et al. (2019, 1) argue that "the

10 See Davis and Michelitch (2022) and Tubaro et al. (2021) for more on reflexivity and quantitative methods.

ethical expectations guiding reflexive openness are universal, and thus the approach is inclusive of researchers regardless of subfield, methodology, topic, and empirical context;" but on the practical side, "our understanding of openness must eschew one-size-fits-all templates, erring instead on the side of respect for ethical research practice on a case-by-case basis" (15).

Reflexivity goes beyond issues of ethics alone, and I argue that in efforts to promote greater reflexivity about ethics, positionality, and researchers' decisions, we should accept different approaches, rather than pursuing a universal standard. It can be difficult to know whether or how certain identities, actions, or experiences affected data gathering and research findings, and some factors that affected the research process may be too personal to share. We therefore should give researchers tools and frameworks to pursue reflexivity and openness but trust them to decide what they disclose in different settings.

Ethics and Openness during Field Research

When approaching questions of reflexivity and openness in different settings, what we divulge about ourselves in research settings is an ethical issue; what we divulge when presenting, writing, or teaching about our role in the research process more often constitutes a professional issue, related to our standing within a workplace or academic/professional field. Ethically, we are obliged to treat research participants with respect; to seek to benefit or at least not harm them; to not undertake unnecessary risks to our own safety; and, ideally, to go beyond the inadequate "procedural ethics" of Institutional Review Boards to a more extensive set of ethical practices that fully respect the individuals and communities with whom we work as *people* and not "human subjects" (Frazer 2020; Fujii 2012, 2018; Guillemin and Gillam 2004; Howe 2022; Krystalli 2020; Parkinson 2019; Pearlman 2023; Teele 2014).

At research sites, it is generally important to be honest with people, and ideally researchers should not feel like we must hide who we are and what we think (Ruffa, this symposium). But this may sometimes be a necessary choice for ethical reasons, for personal safety, or for learning about the perspectives of people with whom we might disagree or who might find aspects of our identities or views objectionable (Ben Shitrit 2018; Frank-Vitale 2021; Fujii 2012; Thaler 2021). So long as such nondisclosure is not planned as a strategy to get individuals to reveal things in order to present them in a negative light, then holding some information back about one's own identities or opinions can be perfectly ethical.[11] If we hold strong political or social views relevant to the research we are conducting, however, it may be counterproductive in some settings to try to conceal them in order to seem impartial, since research participants might find it a failure to appreciate the stakes of issues being investigated (e.g., Décobert 2014; Malejacq and Mukhopadhyay 2016). And regardless of what we do or do not say, research participants and communities will make assumptions and draw their own conclusions (Driscoll and Schuster 2018; Fujii 2010).

In some cases, a researcher's identities may have little effect on findings, but it can be difficult to know how others perceive us. While conducting interview research on civil conflict and state building in Liberia—within a post-positivist framework—I was sometimes asked whether I was Christian or not. I am Jewish (though not particularly religious), but not knowing what my interlocutors' attitudes toward Jewish people were, I deflected and tried to move the conversation along. It is possible some interviewees were put off by my response and not being openly Christian, but I was not conducting research about religious issues, and I did not get the sense that these interactions strongly affected what interviewees told me. This was also not an attempt to use nondisclosure to get interviewees to divulge information. I therefore did not consider this issue important to note when discussing

11 Studies methodologically employing deception or misinforming participants about the nature of research, however, have a very high ethical bar to clear (see e.g., Teele 2014).

or writing about my research process. Other researchers might have taken a different path if they were using other epistemologies or methods. Had I been using an interpretivist approach, it would have been important to consider and discuss what my interactions might have revealed about how my interviewees thought about religion, and the ways this shaped their views about politics. If I had been conducting survey research in a positivist framework, I would have wanted to note religion as a possible characteristic along which to distinguish different enumerators to try to control for enumerator bias, since there are regions in Liberia where religious divides are politically salient.

While I chose not to reveal my religious beliefs, obscuring or not disclosing identities is easier with some than others. Which identities people might feel they have to hide will vary contextually and is unequal in the burdens placed on researchers due to societal biases, phobias, and discrimination: one cannot necessarily hide racial identity, gender presentation, body type, or certain disabilities. Ultimately, decisions around what parts of oneself to reveal in a research setting are personal and contingent on circumstances. Unless there are ethical concerns about how research was conducted, it should also be left to researchers to decide what they wish to discuss about their identities when writing up or presenting their research.

Dilemmas of Reflexivity in Presenting and Publishing

Professionally, we may feel a need to provide or withhold certain information to satisfy academic, policy, or practice audiences and gatekeepers outside of the research context itself (Parkinson and Wood 2015, 26), in order to protect prospects for research impact and publication and career advancement.[12] In presenting research, academic and policy audiences often call for "objectivity" and for 'evidence-based' recommendations. Some people may think discussing researchers' identities and personal roles in the research process in a reflexive manner is self-centered, unnecessary, or indulgent "navel gazing" (Wedeen 2010, 258). Or they may believe deep consideration of the contingencies of data gathering and limits of our knowledge (see de Vries and Glawion 2023) undermines "scientific" credibility. Depending on the audience or venue, there will be varying pressures to limit reflexivity or opportunities to engage in it. To mainstream reflexivity and discussions of positionality, it will require a change in culture in teaching and also among key gatekeepers: editors, reviewers, event organizers, and funding agencies (Krystalli 2020; Bjarnegård, this symposium).

Some factors and experiences that shape our research and thinking, however, may remain too personal to share, such as experiences of violence or psychological abuse, mental health issues, family issues, or even harsh disagreements with advisers. At times, experiences that occurred years before may still affect the research process but dredging them up for public audiences would be unnecessarily painful. While political science as a field should more openly discuss issues like mental health and sexual violence and we should support those who are willing to share their own experiences (Almasri, Read, and Vandeweerdt 2022; Hunt 2022), this should not be an expectation. Even if mental health difficulties or violent experiences affected research, individuals should not be *pressured* to share information about these issues in the name of transparency.

Flexibility, Not Universality

Rather than pushing researchers towards rigid, one-size-fits-all standards or checklists, we should adopt the idea of reflexive openness about ethics and about the research process more broadly (Kapiszewski and Wood 2022; MacLean et al. 2019; Thomson 2021). We should be "actively reflexive," constantly considering on our own positionality and that of participants and research brokers,[13] our ethical obligations, and

12 Ethical obligations to participants and their communities extend "beyond the field" over space and time (Knott 2019; Thaler 2021), and inattentiveness to ethical issues may also have reputational or professional consequences for researchers.

13 Research brokers may include research assistants, translators, fixers, gatekeepers, key contacts, or others in the research

the context in which we are working, iteratively making decisions based on those reflections, and acknowledging the contingency of our research (Krystalli et al. 2021; MacLean 2013; MacLean et al. 2019; Soedirgo and Glas 2020, 528–29). And we should exercise humility about the potential that our choices and analyses have not always been right (Fujii 2018; Porisky and Glas 2023). Throughout the research process, we should seek to be as open and honest as possible in dialogue with ethical principles and obligations (Johnson 2021; Kapiszewski and Wood 2022; Shesterinina 2021; Thaler 2021), but it is also important not to demand that researchers divulge information that puts them or others at risk, or that makes them deeply uncomfortable.

Reflexivity and openness will take varying forms depending on the person, the research topic, and the research context and process. Just as research plans and methods must be adapted to local conditions, we should maintain flexibility, rather than seeking universal standards for reflexivity in social research. We should ensure that discussing positionality, for instance, does not simply become another box for researchers to tick in order to publish, but instead encourages deeper, more active reflection (see also Eck and Lanigan, this symposium). Greater discussion of positionality and reflexivity in graduate coursework and training, along with continued mainstreaming in presentations and publications, will help to cultivate new norms across the discipline. Ultimately, this can produce research that is both more attentive to the communities and contexts in which it is conducted, and that is more intellectually honest.

setting who facilitate research (Eriksson Baaz and Utas 2019).

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Challenges and Strategies for the Reflexive Researcher Studying Elite Organizations

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Debates surrounding reflexivity—both as ethics, methods, and research practice—have overwhelmingly focused on weak and vulnerable populations and situations in which the researcher is assumed to be in the more powerful position (Shesterinina 2019, 190). In those contexts, ethically sound practices of do no harm have been amply discussed and the relevance of power imbalances acknowledged (Campbell 2017, 95). But how does all of it apply when the power differential is less clear, and it is the researcher who appears to be—prima facie—weak and vulnerable? Building on Eck and Lanigan's "practical strategies for "doing" reflexivity" (this symposium), I focus on how to practice reflexivity at the interface between the researcher and their respondents. I do so by providing an illustration from an elite context in which the power differential between the researcher and the respondent is not as clear-cut. I find that even when the researcher seems more vulnerable, they retain some power, which needs to be used wisely and ethically, relying on their moral compass.

Contexts in which power differentials are not as clear-cut are particularly fruitful spaces to illustrate the importance of practicing reflexivity for all scholars, regardless of their epistemological orientation. First, positivist-leaning scholarly work with ambitions of "objectivity" has extensively studied elite contexts without really practicing reflexivity (Allison 1971; Feaver 2010). I would like to illustrate, through my own experience as a researcher working on elite contexts, that it was only when I started to practice reflexivity that several crucial organizational dynamics became visible. Practicing reflexivity has improved my own research processes even when earlier on I was writing in a more "objective" way. "Objectivity" in this context does not mean that positivist work on elites is more objective in any way but it refers instead to rather standardized ways of doing research that make the author disappear in scholarly publications (see Bjarnegård, this symposium for a more systematic reflection). Second, because the debate about reflexivity and research ethics has focused so much on vulnerable groups one is left wondering whether the same ethical standards apply in contexts in which the powerful is the respondent. Practicing reflexivity is therefore crucial also to ensure that we are abiding by appropriate ethical standards of protecting the vulnerable. We should, however, also not forget that practicing reflexivity comes with some cost and trade-offs: reflexivity makes the research process longer and more cumbersome and sometimes at the risk of falling into navel gazing. Practicing reflexivity is no panacea but normalizing it in research processes across epistemological traditions is more important than ever.

Recent research understands elites to be "not as monolithic as often asserted in political science interview literature" (Glass 2021, 438) and encourage us not to think of elites as a binary (i.e., elite vs. non elite). While I study a particularly extreme kind of elite (the military) I think that several insights are transferrable to other types of elites, such as bureaucrats or politicians. The military elite is extreme because of its hierarchical structure, special function, and perceived uniformity. On the one hand, some of the elite dynamics can therefore be seen more distinctly. On the other hand, even this extreme kind of elite may display high levels of heterogeneity which we can expect to see to an even greater extent in other elites.

Drawing on debates about reflexivity from critical, feminist, and positivist perspectives, as well as my own experience, I identify four facets of doing reflexivity in research on the military and extrapolate lessons on how to practice reflexivity in elite contexts. I focus on (1) how to identify where power lies within the organization; (2) the multi-layered dimensions of encounters between the researcher and the respondents; (3) how to practice non-judgmental openness; and (4) knowledge production. These lessons should be useful for practicing reflexivity in elite contexts and beyond whilst also being aware of the trade-offs that come with it.[14]

Reflexivity and Multiple Layers of Power and Vulnerability

The first step in practicing reflexivity in elite contexts is about understanding the context one studies. The military is "'the organization charged with the use of legitimate, if sometimes contested, use of organized violence" (Ben-Ari 2014, 37). Prima facie, service members qualify as elite "individuals or groups who ostensibly have closer proximity to power or particular professional expertise" (Lancaster 2017, 93).[15] Also at lower levels of the military echelon, service members are likely to have greater lethal and physical power over a researcher. Militaries are also highly hierarchical and secretive with strong organizational cultures and collective identities, in which service members give away part of their individual identity to conform. Military cultures are widely recognized to harbor distinct and deeply ingrained visions of masculinities—often glorifying "warrior masculinities" —and role conceptions that guide their actions (Soeters 2018; Ruffa 2018).

Yet, when Lancaster (2017, 96) studied elites, she highlighted that they "were not an homogenous group" and that the power differential between researcher and respondent did not "play out in any predictable or consistent way." Notwithstanding the strong totalizing tendencies, military power is diffuse and has multiple layers, which the reflexive researcher should try to understand. So, a first important lesson about how to practice reflexivity is to question oneself as to whether one is not looking at the organization in a too homogeneous way. When I started off as a student of military and political elites, I did not know what reflexivity was and whether it was important. I was aiming at identifying somewhat objectively some kind of patterns that I could then carefully describe. Yet, it was only when I started to practice reflexivity, a few years into my fieldwork, that I could start see the multifaceted nature of the military as an organization. In comparison to other elites, one might expect the military to appear prima facie more homogenous because of its secretive nature. I suspect however, that other kinds of elites—just like the military—may perform as more homogenous than they actually are.

To start with, practicing reflexivity allowed me to capture more informal dynamics. When understanding where power is, rank matters. Service members serving as non-commissioned soldiers will certainly find themselves in a more vulnerable position than junior officers. But ordering is not only structured by formal hierarchies. A senior officer specializing in logistics will hold less power than an active-duty officer at the same rank in the infantry because of the centrality of combat in most Western militaries. So, learning to read insignia of rank but also understanding the informal hierarchies is of crucial importance. I expect this to be relevant for other, less extreme forms of elites

14 During my research, I conducted about 800 interviews and surveys with military and political elites.

15 In some contexts, and for some audiences, militaries also qualify as repellent groups Gallaher (2009, 129) provides a relatively broad definition and uses "the term repellent—causing distaste or aversion—not to refer to perks of personality and preferences thereof but to an ideology that promotes dominating other groups in society. These sorts of ideologies may be found across the political spectrum. Under this rubric, warlords, guerrillas, paramilitaries, and even some states could be classified as repellant. These groups must, of course, be sufficiently large and organized to present a coherent discourse and back it up with action. While my definition here suggests that violence is part and parcel of the domination process, it need not be. That is, the repellent category also includes groups who provide the vocal and written justification for their quest of domination over other groups in society, even though they leave the actual violence to others."

as well: while informal hierarchies may be more difficult to detect in the military, we may find that for other, less extreme, elites they might be more widespread, easier to detect.

More importantly, identifying the particularly vulnerable groups and individuals provide both opportunities for establishing rapport and spaces that must be navigated carefully and with care. When conducting a large-scale survey on an Italian battalion in 2013 I remember being approached impromptu by several non-commissioned soldiers being willing to share their frustration with us. Those informal conversations eventually motivated and fed into our paper (Ruffa and Sundberg 2018). As a woman researcher, I am often approached by women soldiers willing to share their experiences, struggles, and difficulties. Gender and race are indeed factors that go beyond rank and unit that structure hierarchies within militaries. The first step is to acknowledge that power in the organization is diffuse and multilayered. The reflexive researcher needs to devote time and attention to understand those formal and informal dynamics.

Practicing Reflexivity and the Encounters with the Respondents

The multilayered encounters between the military and the reflexive researcher are equally important from gaining access to knowledge production (Higate and Cameron 2006; Ben-Ari 2014; Carreiras, Castro, and Frederic 2016). Because the respondent is the powerful one "barriers can be produced to resist the scrutiny of research" (Lancaster 2017, 95; Gallaher 2009). Yet, the literature has highlighted how the boundaries between what civilian and what military is are often blurred (Basham, Belkin, and Gifkins 2015). Furthermore, when studying an all-encompassing organization like the military, the researcher navigates a context with multiple layers of distinctions and potential connections. For instance, being a civilian at a military academy is often perceived differently from being a civilian at a civilian university. While this may seem like a banal and obvious observation, it is not since signaling one's own provenance can do a lot in terms of access and establishing connection. Becoming aware of that helped make sense of some of the reactions. Race, gender, age, nationality and having a military background among other layers—shape the ability of the researcher to gain access or establish rapport. Several studies have explored what it means to have several ranges of "otherness" (Townsend-Bell 2009) and intersectionality matters to establish rapport when studying elite contexts. Perhaps surprisingly, cultural proximity does not seem to be the main driver for establishing rapport. It would be interesting to explore whether that would be different in large multinational organizations that are less internally homogenous, such as UN bureaucracies.

Because of the existing racialized hierarchies in UN peacekeeping, being a Western woman facilitated my access to Ghanaian, Indian, Bangladeshi, and Korean peacekeepers in Southern Lebanon (Ruffa 2014). As someone who studied both French and Italian peacekeepers, my ability to access those organizations was different: as an Italian national, I was perceived by the French as mostly innocuous and had easy access, while for the Italians I was a problem, and they did not authorize my visits to Afghanistan for several months. We tend to assume that being an insider means advantages, but my experience with the Italian military shows that this is not self-evident. Doing this in a context in which it is the researcher to be more vulnerable requires the researcher to be aware not only of the ethical implications of her research but also of her access to the sites and most importantly her own safety. Self-awareness of the multilayered nature of the researcher's identity facilitates establishing connections with the pockets of vulnerabilities in the organizational structure. I did not see these distinctions before I started to practice reflexivity.

The reflexive researcher needs to access information and make contacts, becoming aware of its ascribed outsider status and how to navigate it. This outsider status is particularly strong and detrimental when studying the military as "the inbuilt suspicion of outsiders found in any large-scale organization is intensified by the armed forces being the organization associated with national security" (Ben-Ari 2014, 31). Naïveté—the perception of being innocuous and ignorant—is almost unavoidable under these circumstances

and comes with the fact of being an outsider, in this case a Western civilian woman researcher. An important distinction to make is between "performed naïveté" as a deliberate strategy or the acknowledgement of the fact that being read as naïve is a reality that has certain consequences. As an outsider, I will be perceived as naïve simply because I have chosen a different career path. So, there is an unavoidable dimension to it, which is in the eyes of the powerful organization and how naïve one is perceived to be depends on the layers of separation between the researcher and the respondents. The extent in which naïveté is an acceptable methodological strategy is more contested. Some see the benefits of performing gender stereotypes (Alberti and Jenne, 2019, 53) but the use of naïveté is an acceptable strategy only to some extent and one must find one's limits in one's integrity and truthfulness. False naïveté can also disrupt rapport or make respondents suspicious. So if it is possible, one should practice naïveté in a genuine way, just as a way of being curious and willing to learn. Naïveté may be a powerful way to get great responses but needs to be handled with care and one should resist the temptation to use it as a deliberate strategy.

Practicing Non-Judgmental Curiosity

Vulnerable people in elite contexts deserve the same kind of do no harm ethic warranted to anyone else, but it remains somewhat unclear how to practice reflexivity with powerful research participants. First and foremost, do no harm applies to them too. But how do we practice reflexivity in those contexts? A useful lesson comes from Jane Addams who "actively engaged with members of the military (…) had no military background, and was a fervent opponent of militarism and war" (Ruffa and Tulp 2022). For Jane Addams, we need to be able to still engage with our respondents as humans to humans. For less extreme elite, this may be easier at times but not necessarily, in highly polarized professional spaces, such as political elites.

The researcher needs to deeply reflect on one's own identity and how to portray oneself while studying those elites. Researchers investigating repellent groups have hidden some of their beliefs for fear of being denied access (Gallaher 2009). In my own work—once I started to practice reflexivity—I have chosen the opposite approach: I have revealed openly my political and normative views, but I have also tried to cultivate and express a nonjudgmental openness and curiosity towards my respondents. When asked I have always been open about my pacifist-leaning views and I have used symbols to communicate that very clearly. When I was hosted by the Italian contingent in Afghanistan during my PhD, I walked around in the base with a red coat—that underscored me being different from the rest of the people there, all dressed in uniform. All of my respondents know—or assume, if they do not ask directly ¬—that I am someone who distinguishes herself as much as possible from the military identity. At the same time, I have always been genuinely curious to understand human beings, servicemembers and organizations that are profoundly different from the context I live in. This posture—a sort of "non-judgmental curiosity"—has allowed me to navigate, learn and understand powerful organizations and get to know powerful people without ever forgetting that I was and remain different. Importantly, there is an inherently ascribed outsider status that determine the distancing which affects the research and the kinds of answers we get.

Non-judgmental curiosity and openness are key but are not sufficient. One needs to also reflect on how to deal with the information that one receives and how to build the trust that is needed to continue to study these contexts. One can accept compromises but always do it with integrity. I have always accepted making all information concerning my respondents anonymous and removing information that could be militarily sensitive but have always refused to allow the military to have any opinion on what is included or not in writing and presentations. What is sensitive is contested and relative and can be used by the powerful to exercise power and cover up information. That is particularly difficult when the researcher finds herself in situations of vulnerability and dependency: when deployed to a warzone and the researcher is dependent on the

military to provide safety, the researcher may be obliged to accept compromises. On the one hand, the reflexive researcher must accept compromises. On the other hand, nonjudgemental openness may allow her to stumble upon information that the organization tried hard to hide and to also constantly ask questions to challenge authority. The interpretivist stance of letting the field talk to us is particularly valid in this context (Kurowska and de Guevara 2020).

When deployed with the Italian army, most of the respondents framed their mission as peacekeeping. But in informal contexts—at the canteen, when drinking coffee, whilst being accompanied to different corners of the bases—I kept getting hints at the fact that Italian troops were actually fighting and were at war, which I then wrote about. The very notion of "hanging out" and being able to detect those queues became possible and acceptable only when I started to practice reflexivity (Büger 2021). Understanding the context requires openness but also integrity in terms of how to write and narrate what one is seeing, which affects knowledge production, and without damaging the respondent's career (see Bjarnegård, this symposium). Cultivating trust, building reputation and credibility are fundamental to ensure access and maintain it. The reflexive researcher needs to constantly and continuously reevaluate and reassess those elements. One needs to humbly reflect on one's mistakes and let those lessons guide future behavior. One of my most blatant mistakes—and I made many—was when, at the end of my fieldwork, I accepted that the Italian and French military would examine the material I had collected. I accepted because I feared the consequences—I was in Afghanistan, in their bases, at the time—but I then regretted it and ended up submitting just a long abstract in English, which was more than sufficient for those ultimately not-so-interested officers. Being able to address that mistake using my moral compass was crucial. One could imagine this could travel to other elites to. Furthermore, it was only because I included reflexivity in my thinking and started to practice it that I could clearly choose the appropriate course of action.

Reflexivity and Knowledge Production in Elite Settings

Reflexivity when studying the military is fluid and has obvious ramifications for knowledge production. Helpful guidance comes from critical military studies, which "has long been concerned with issues pertaining to epistemology of knowledge and the fluctuating border between what is strictly inside and outside a military sphere" (Danielsson 2022, 5). The military is a secretive and closed organization so to be reflexive is also to be aware of how we—as researchers—contribute to the knowledge production about it. The military may utilize our voice to convey certain messages to the outside. This is particularly relevant for militaries without a strong public relations apparatus. I have often had senior officers telling me: "please make sure to make that point very clear when you write about it," which I have always refused to do. Notwithstanding the limited readership we reach, it is very important for the reflexive researcher to reflect and make sure that we are not being used as some sort of spoke-person for the military organization. Another risk is that the researcher may be misunderstood in different phases of the knowledge production. One should always ask oneself whether one can stand behind the main take away message. For instance, when studying French and Italian peacekeepers I have tried to shy away from hyper-simplified descriptions about my own research, which may be challenging when talking to policy audiences (see Campbell, this symposium). I did that because I wanted to provide a fair depiction of what they do and how they think but also because I want to continue to study them over the course of my career.

A second important point regarding knowledge production is how we might understand the feminist principle of empowerment and how "bringing back" the research applies to elite contexts (Wibben 2016). The empowerment principle cannot simply be imported in this case, but we could still partly apply it to parts of the organization, particularly its vulnerable pockets. In unexpected ways, we have the opportunity to give voice to the invisible parts of the organization: for instance, women soldiers in a male-dominated context, members

of ethnic minorities, or traumatized people. Along similar lines, we could bring back our findings and contribute to transforming the military in directions we consider appropriate. Understanding the organization in its complexity allows us to adopt different reflexive strategies.

Conclusions

Reflexivity as both a methodological and ethical tool is crucial to work with the vulnerability of the research participants, but it is just as important when we study their relative position of power. Practicing reflexivity in elite contexts suggests that even when studying powerful organizations, power is diffuse. This shapes the quality of our encounters with the organization in which multiple and different layers of our identities become salient. In this context, practicing nonjudgmental curiosity is crucial, as is the openness to compromise without lowering ethical standards and integrity. Lastly, we should not forget how knowledge production may be influenced in unwarranted ways by the powerful organization we study. There again we need to set boundaries, which are to be constantly renegotiated. These considerations should accompany us throughout the research process. We should continuously balance our ability to be open and curious without becoming blind to patriarchal and militaristic structures. Even in elite contexts, we should acknowledge and embrace the human-to-human interaction while being aware of the boundaries we set. Ultimately, we do retain some power, which we need to use to practice reflexivity in ethically sound ways and using our moral compass. At the same time, practicing reflexivity comes with trade-offs: it may make our research slower, and it may be difficult to condense the results of our reflections in ways that are compatible with the formats we are often expected to publish in (see Bjarnegård, this symposium). Still, taken together, practicing reflexivity is an extremely useful methods and research practice that can make our research stronger, richer, and more ethically sound.

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The Need for Reflexivity in Scholarly Writing

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There is, by now, a large literature about reflexivity in social science research. In this literature reflexivity is perceived of as both a perspective on and a practice in the research process and its relevance is described as both methodological and ethical. Yet, there is a discrepancy between the convincing arguments for reflexivity in this literature on the one hand, and the visibility of reflexive practices in scholarly output, on the other hand. This piece explores this discrepancy and seeks to investigate ways in which we can close the gap between what we say we should do and how we document what we have done and what it means. Achieving reflexivity in article writing is not an easy feat, because it implies shifting the focus from "selling the message" towards questioning it. To what extent does reflexivity challenge norms of scholarly writing? This piece explores this question and seeks to find some possible ways forward towards changing this norm.

Reflexivity has mostly been discussed in relation to the positionality of the researcher and particularly in qualitative field of research focusing on power relations and intersectionality. As pointed out in the Introduction, reflexivity offers insights that are of relevance for social science more broadly. Reflexivity addresses basic principles of research methods and ethics relevant to all social science fields, such as transparency, replicability, and bias. The intersecting identities of researchers and research participants—and the power relations between them—affect the collection and analysis of empirical data in several ways: access to respondents and information, what information is assumed, conveyed or concealed, and how narratives are framed, interpreted and valued (e.g., Finlay 2002; Berger 2015; Wibben 2016; Soedirgo and Glas 2020; Glas 2021; Thaler 2021). In Townsend-Bell's (2009, 311) words, "identity forms your assumptions, affects the kinds of questions you ask and the evidence you seek. If you ignore how your identities impact interpretation then you are arguably mis-specifying your research model." At the same time, the people you seek information from carry their own identities and agency that affect the kind of answers they give and the narratives they convey.

While most of the literature on reflexivity focuses on it as a topic in its own right, this piece seeks to explore the potential and obstacles for its reach and integration into academic texts that primarily focus on "something else." I reiterate points that have been made by others concerning the reach and relevance of reflexivity across the field of social science and throughout the research process. First, scholars from *all social sciences fields* should engage more with reflexivity. As noted by Bond (2018, 45), "too many smart positivist scholars wrongly equate reflexivity […] with introducing bias where it previously did not exist. Precisely to the contrary, in quantitative as much as in qualitative research, reflexivity is a way of neutralizing pre-existing bias to improve the scientific value of our work." Furthermore, reflexivity is of relevance for *the whole research process* as it shapes the interpretations we make and the conclusions we draw (Thomas 2018)—and this piece particularly emphasizes that reflexivity also shapes how we communicate and write about our research. Published written work is the most visible example of the research standards of a field, and reflexivity is still largely made invisible in the finished products that we share with readers and that represent our research. This piece elaborates on why it is important that researchers not just write about reflexivity in their drafts but that such text is able to survive all the way until the published version. It discusses what

needs for this to happen, and what the hurdles and ways forward may be.

In this endeavor, I concur with much of what was said—and said well—in the Soedirgo and Glas piece on Active Reflexivity (2020). In it, they outline four strategies for how researchers should *do* active reflexivity: recording assumptions around positionality, systematizing reflections, bringing other individuals into the process and, finally, showing reflexivity work in publications. This piece picks up on that fourth strategy, which only gets a paragraph in Soedirgo and Glas (2020). I elaborate on and concretize the suggestions they make, add a few more, but also identify potential hurdles to following this strategy.

A Call to Follow Through: Communicating Reflexivity in Publications

Is the lack of writing on reflexivity really a problem? Is it even lacking? The answer to those questions depends on where you look for writing on reflexivity, and for what purposes—but I would answer them with a contingent "yes." As noted above, there is a large and expanding literature on reflexivity as such, but in most such literature the elaboration on reflexivity is part of the research aim: it is not used as a methodological or ethical tool to answer other types of questions. This is despite the fact that the contributions of literature on reflexivity are important and, in theory, applicable to a wide range of research. The field addresses questions of how researchers should treat veracity, when to trust narratives emanating from sensitive contexts, or how to balance demands for transparency with the security of respondents (Fujii 2010; Tripp 2018). Some contributions are also written as attempts to explain to the wider discipline how field intensive research is carried out, that reflexivity is built into interpretive work, and how it constitutes an important component of the trustworthiness of such research (Tripp 2018; Shesterinina 2021). Handbooks and textbooks on feminist peace research also bring up reflexivity in various ways, to demonstrate how it is part of feminist research ethic, how critical self-reflection enables listening and the incorporation of new perspectives, and how it keeps researchers accountable (McLeod and O'Reilly 2021; Väyrynen et al. 2021; Wibben 2009; 2016). Taken together, this body of research provides convincing arguments for why reflexivity is needed, and it gives advice on how to do reflexivity in practice.

What is lacking is thus not writing on reflexivity per se, but the incorporation of the insights of this body of literature into research that is primarily focusing on other issues. What is more, while textbooks and articles do give advice on how to practice reflexivity, this practical advice rarely extends into the process of writing and to the presentation of research results. The emphasis is on reflexivity in field work and data collection rather than on the communication of it. This leads to a lack of integration of reflexivity into scholarly publications. Even when reflexivity is, to some extent, practiced in the research process, it is not necessarily adequately reflected and communicated in subsequent scholarly publications. The very same researchers who have written influential pieces on the importance of reflecting on one's positionality and practicing reflexivity seem to have a hard time incorporating it into articles that primarily deal with other themes. Sometimes reflexivity is left out almost entirely, because it is difficult to fit into an article format. Quite often, it is elaborated on in the methods section, only to be largely abandoned in the subsequent analysis and conclusions. Such examples of discussions of positionality and reflexivity that are not followed up, integrated into, or continued in the discussion, analysis, results, and assessment of findings run the risk of being seen as nothing more than introspection or even self-absorption. Even if a researcher has practiced reflexivity in fieldwork and data collection, it is not fully incorporated into the research process until it is taken seriously enough to affect the final stages of it: the interpretations and conclusions as they are put in writing.

In the Soedirgo and Glas (2020) article, the focus is on the research process before the writing and publication stage. The strategy of "showing reflexivity work" is touched upon and exemplified by Fujii's (2009) book on the genocide in Rwanda. This is, indeed, a good example of reflexivity put in writing, but the writing, review process

and publication of academic monographs differ from the much stricter format, dependence on favorable reviews, and word-limit associated with writing articles. This is an explanation, but not an excuse—at least not if we really think that reflexivity is of importance to how research is carried out, interpreted, and communicated. The only way we can demonstrate the importance of reflexivity is by communicating it in our writing. It is a matter of following through on commitments. There are considerable hurdles—but also opportunities—for writing about reflexivity.

Writing about Reflexivity: Hurdles and Opportunities

Taking reflexivity seriously implies realizing that the intersecting identities and positions of ourselves as researchers in relation to those that we conduct research about ultimately matter for the results we get. Maintaining self-awareness and critical scrutiny is important throughout the research process, including in the writing process, as we report on our research. Reflecting upon power relations and the related privilege and subordination, outspokenness and silences, and opportunities and closed doors can be seen as a matter of trustworthiness of research.

Yet, reflecting about the research process in writing introduces important tensions between credibility and vulnerability. As Enloe (2016) writes in her insightful "Afterword: Being Reflexively Feminist Shouldn't Be Easy," it is often uncomfortable to try to make our reflexivity visible to our readers. "When we do try, we have to write our sentences in the first person singular, something most of us have been taught to avoid. So it can require some stamina to introduce an 'I' into one's manuscript as one candidly describes to one's readers (and editors and reviewers) how one conducted one's investigations by somewhat questionable means" (259). Reflexivity simply does not fit neatly into the dominant article template.

I have, myself, found that it introduces insecurities and sheds light on biases in a manner that is sometimes difficult to reconcile with the review process. The author is often quite invisible in articles, signaling objectiveness—but introducing reflexivity into the writing implies reflecting on personal behavior, on assumptions and prejudices, and on interactions with research participants—as well as acknowledging that the author is not in full control of the research process. It can concern issues of reliance on local collaborators, uncertainty about how much was actually conveyed about the focus of a survey before participants were recruited to it, or a nagging feeling that respondents talked in a different way to my male colleague when he conducted the interviews. But it can also be about power relations where response rates may be high because respondents felt a more or less subtle pressure to reply, or where I as a foreigner receive access to interviews with high-ranking politicians that my colleagues, with a much better understanding of the context, never get. My understanding is that such experiences are common among all social science researchers. They are commonly shared as stories over drinks in conference receptions, but rarely make it to the written pages of the paper presented earlier in the day. All the above examples are personal experience, but I think only two of these reflections made it into publications. In my book, I include a section on reflexivity and positionality reflecting on power relations in the research process. This does not really count, however, because it is a book with a lot of space, and I do not return to these reflections when drawing my conclusions (Bjarnegård 2013). In an article about election violence in Sri Lanka, we report the impression that participants in some areas may have been primed before attending the workshop where the survey was carried out and we do limit our possibilities to draw conclusions about prevalence as a result—but above all, we take care to explain how our main purpose is not affected (Bjarnegård, Håkansson, and Zetterberg 2022). When put in writing, such experiences introduce vulnerability as they are interpreted as undermining the research. Given how common they are, however, one could just as easily claim that it is their omission that undermines the research. From a slightly different perspective of reflexivity, they could just as well be interpreted as strengthening its credibility.

As researchers, it is our duty to follow through and communicate how and why it matters, to seek

to "nail the bias" (point attributed to Lovenduski in Kenny 2014). It is a reflective learning process, sometimes raising questions that cannot be directly answered, but if we take it on as a collective challenge in the discipline, we will learn more about ourselves as researchers and how we affect our research tasks. Learning about ourselves, however, is not the primary aim of practicing reflexivity. As Enloe (2016) writes, our research is, after all, not about ourselves. Instead, an approach to research that incorporates reflexivity does not shy away from the fact that research is carried out by people with different and intersecting identities, and that these identities matter for how the research participants perceive us, as well as for how we view and interpret our research results. Avoiding navel gazing and unnecessary introspection is best accomplished by making sure that these personal reflections are only there if they can be connected to research objectives or interpretations of results.

The logic of the article format, review process, and general pressures to publish quickly do not readily allow for the insertion of insecurity on the part of the researcher, the acknowledgement of bias, and ultimately the questioning of our sources and the replicability of the study. Rather, advice about how to write "convincingly," filling as many gaps in our argument as possible and highlighting the advantages of our research design are part of how we are taught to write research articles, and it is thus also how we as a discipline—implicitly or explicitly—teach junior scholars how to communicate trustworthy research. It has become how we write, by reflex, though not reflexively. This type of writing is encouraged by how we comment at each other's presentation at conferences, how we review manuscripts, and how we assess research contributions. In order to incorporate reflexivity, we must find ways to nuance our writing, aiming for a reflexive turn.

To make reflexivity thoroughly integrated into the research process, the writing about and communication of reflexivity should be recognized as an integral part of the research process. The task can only be taken on by a larger community of researchers, as elaborating on insecurities and biases in results will be a deviation from the scholarly norm. It cannot be the task of individual authors, particularly not of junior scholars. Changing norms and practices of a discipline should be the responsibility of those with privilege. Gatekeepers of various kinds—conference selection committees, discussants, supervisors, examining committees, reviewers and editors—can accept and encourage the elaboration of such reflection when it exists, and actively ask for it, with reference to the need for reflexivity, when it is absent.

Such encouragement should not be restricted to feminist and interpretivist research but is relevant for a broader part of the discipline. Research is far from perfect and acknowledging this should be part of enhancing credibility. For instance, if Western, male researchers were also routinely urged to reflect on their positions of privilege and how it matters, it would shed new light on many aspects of the research process and the results it produces. We could also ask for more systematic comparisons of interviewer effects, to demonstrate how it matters not just who we ask, but also who asks, as well as what the configuration of interviewer and interviewed looks like. This might also be a good starting point for discussions about different truths and interpretations. We can be clearer about delimitations of our scholarly contributions, given potential uncertainties and biases. A move in this direction would teach us more about our own effects on the research, but it could also contribute to a more complete perspective about what research is about, and what it can say (and not say).

I realize that this is not an easy task, but a first step is to stimulate discussion in this direction. A necessary start is for researchers aiming for reflexivity in practice to elaborate in writing about how it affects their research findings.

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Give and Take: How Reflexivity Enables Ethical Policy-Engaged Research

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What does it mean to engage in ethical research on international policy implementation? International policy implementation describes processes such as international aid, peacekeeping, nuclear non-proliferation policies, and other foreign policy efforts that aim to affect the behavior of states and peoples, all of which have varying degrees of power. Research on international policy implementation implicitly or explicitly studies these power dynamics but rarely aims directly to influence them. In this paper, I will argue that ethical research on international policy implementation requires a focus on the potential benefits of the research to those affecting and affected by international policy implementation. I argue that giving back to these research subjects requires reflexivity throughout the research process: from the generation of the research question to the collection of data, to data analysis and publication.

Building on Campbell's (2017) discussion of the practice of reflexivity, Ruffa's (this symposium) examination of reflexivity in relation to research in elite policy contexts, and Eck and Lanigan's (this symposium) discussion about communicating the reflexive process of research, I discuss how these reflexive practices shape the ability of scholars to give back to the policymakers and populations that they study. When one researches international aid, peacekeeping, humanitarian aid, transnational security threats, or other efforts to implement international policy, how does one give back? What are the benefits of the research to policymakers, practitioners, and potentially vulnerable populations? Even if a researcher can imagine the potential benefits, how can the researcher translate their research into these benefits?

The Ethical Obligation to Equally Distribute the Benefits of Research

Common guidelines around human subject research ethics in the United States (US) developed in the mid-20th century, and then spread to Europe and beyond, aiming to ensure that any potential risks to research participants were balanced with potential benefits (Jacobs and Ljungberg 2021). In the wake of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study (1932-1972)—in which the US Public Health Service refused to cure African American men's syphilis because it would undermine their research study—the US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in the Belmont Report outlined the three principles for the protection of human subjects in biomedical and behavioral research: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. Respect for persons requires the researcher to "acknowledge autonomy [of research participants] and the requirement to protect those with diminished autonomy" (National Commission 1978, 4). Beneficence describes the researchers' obligation to: "1) do no harm and 2) maximize possible benefits and minimize possible harms" (5). Justice refers to the fairness with which the benefits and burdens of research are distributed, including by ensuring that research does not only lead to benefits from those who can afford it and does not "unduly involve persons from groups unlikely to be among the beneficiaries of subsequent applications of the research" (6). Taken together, these three ethical principles require that researchers ensure that their research does no harm *and* provide broader societal benefit. Although these ethical principles were focused on the United States' context, they have been broadly

adopted by scholars elsewhere (Douglas-Jones 2017; Jacobs and Ljungberg 2021).

Existing Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines, which aim to ensure that scholars carry out ethical research, focus primarily on minimizing the potential harm to research subjects with little concern for ensuring broader distribution of the benefits. After all, the purpose of IRBs is to protect the research participants from harm and, in turn the researcher, and their institution, from harm or litigation (Guillemin et al. 2012). And yet, two of the core Belmont Report principles focus not just on mitigating the harm to human subjects, but on ensuring research projects' benefits. There remains variation in ethical review structures and practices across countries, institutions, and professional fields, but balancing risks with public benefits is, ostensibly, a foundational principle and goal of IRBs around the world (Tapscott and Machón, n.d.).

Particularly in social science research, assessing the potential benefits of research that has not yet been conducted and ensuring the equal distribution of these benefits often seems unachievable, or at least beyond the scope of scholarly training (Jacobsen and Landau 2003). This would not only require anticipating the results of the research but understanding how these results might influence international policy implementation. Most scholars leave this type of consideration of the implications of research to the end of the research project, at which point some aim to "disseminate" their scholarly results to a policy audience.

Reflexivity and Giving Back

In spite of a shift in the broader international relations field to support more policy engagement—spurred in part by initiatives like the Bridging the Gap project—many international relations scholars are still uncertain what broader policy engagement entails or what disseminating their research involves. If they do disseminate their research, it is often in the form of giving a talk or writing an Op Ed. But does this satisfy the Belmont Report's call to ensure that the benefits of the research are equally shared (Nordstrom and Robben 1995)?

I argue that reflexivity offers part of the solution to fulfilling the researcher's obligation of giving back, particularly when studying contexts affected by political violence. As indicated in in the introduction to this forum, reflexivity "refers to a researcher's active consideration of and engagement with the ways in which his own sense-making and the particular circumstances that might have affected it, throughout all phases of the research process, relate to the knowledge claims he ultimately advances in written form" (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2013, 100). Sustaining reflexivity throughout the research process requires that the researcher employ three consistent practices.

First, as Eck and Lanigan (this volume), reflexivity requires continuous self-reflection that examines the effect of the researcher's positionality on the data that he/she/they has access to and how he/she/they interprets and constructs meaning from the data (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011). When researching the international policy implementation process, this type of self-reflection requires that the researcher understand when they/he/she holds power, even in an elite context (see Ruffa, this symposium), and how this power might influence the policy implementation process, in positive or negative ways.

Second, and relatedly, reflexivity of the researcher's own positionality and of others' positionality is central to the process of understanding the data that the research is collecting and what these data mean. As Fujii (2018) so astutely notes, real understanding in interviews and data collection comes through the creation of relationships with research participants. Through these relationships and continuous reflexivity, the researcher gains knowledge while being changed by the knowledge that she/he/they gained. When the researcher is researching the policy process, she/he/they gain knowledge not only of the process or institution of study but also of the perspectives, needs, and reality of the policymakers as well as other actors involved in the policy process.

Third, an additional method for checking the researcher's own assumptions, and how their positionality reflects and affects those assumptions, is to present the findings back to the research participants (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011). When considered reflexively, rarely are these

dissemination exercises simply ways of validating immutable findings. Instead, they are opportunities to shape and further understand one's research findings and how others view their potential benefits and harms.

When studying the policy process, employing a reflexive approach at all stages of the research process—question generation and design, data collection and analysis, writing and publication—is likely not only to build greater understanding of the phenomenon of study but also to enable the researcher to understand how to meet their ethical obligation of supporting the equal distribution of the potential benefits of the research. It is likely to help the researcher understand how different actors involved in the policy process, and its implementation, view its success and failure. It should enable the researcher to understand how to frame their research in a way that may shape the policy process, even if it does so by proffering profound critiques. It is also likely to enable the researcher to develop the relationships and trust and knowledge necessary to speak directly to policymakers and other related actors about the relevance of the research findings to this process. Finally, this reflexive approach is likely to generate new research questions and ideas as the research observes changes in the broader policy context and in their own understanding of this context and how it shapes both research and subject alike.

As with all ethical considerations, the reflexive process does not ensure that the researcher knows exactly how to distribute the benefits of their research equally. But the reflexive process will enable the researcher to better understand how to navigate the process of translating their/her/his research into implications that are relevant for policymakers and populations concerned. In some cases, the researcher may choose to present some findings in an open forum but discuss other, more sensitive findings in a more private forum with policymakers. The former approach may give visibility and exposure to the findings, but the latter may help policymakers understand how to alter their policies based on the findings. In other cases, the researcher may decide to eschew direct engagement with international policymakers and focus, instead, on sharing the implications of the research with non-governmental actors who can hold their governments accountable for changing policies.

Each of these pathways to "giving back" has potential benefits, and potential harms, that the researcher should continue to use the reflexive process to assess and understand. The researcher's choices at this dissemination phase also depend on their relationships and how the researcher built and sustained these relationships throughout the reflexive research process. From this perspective, the research process is a continuous process of reflexivity: from idea-generation, to data collection, to analysis, to dissemination, and back to idea-generation. I have argued that how the researcher chooses to engage with the policy implications of their research throughout this process will significantly shape how the researcher actually influences this policy process.

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Connecting, Venting, and Doing the 'Behind the Scenes' Work: Bringing Feminist and Decolonial Insights to a Comparative Digital Data Collection Project[1]

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Introduction: Collecting Data with High-Risk Participants

Latin America is considered the most dangerous place in the world to be a human rights defender (United Nations Human Rights Council 2021; Front Line Defenders 2022; Global Witness 2022). It is also considered, in the aggregate, to be the most dangerous place to be a woman (ibid.). At the nexus of these two phenomena, the broader research agenda guiding the project discussed in this article seeks to understand women leaders' public displays of bravery in dangerous contexts. A large part of the project has relied on (semi-) ethnographic fieldwork, including in-person, semi-structured interviewing and life history methods.

One of the objectives of the research agenda, however, was to generate data that lends itself to mid-N comparison. In this case, mid-N is neither a small-N study with a handful of participants, nor is it a large-N study that facilitates statistical analysis. Rather, it is a sample that is large enough for analytical comparison while also bearing in mind the complexities of safety identifying and engaging with sensitivity research constituents. Collecting this data purely through in-person interviews is not always possible, given time, resource, and access restrictions, and thus this article explores

1 This project was funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Grant Agreement No. 838513.

alternative methods that can both gather *more* data without losing the feminist and decolonial sensibilities of the broader research agenda.

In this article, we present an approach to undertaking this type of comparative data collection, drawing on insights from feminist and decolonial perspectives. When undertaking sensitive research within social sciences, there is often a tendency to adopt a variation of what Lee Ann Fujii called "relational interviewing", which allows academics to prioritise the respect and dignity of the interviewee through dual-directional methods. Fujii's method is based on an interpretivist methodology (Fujii, 2018, 2), that involves active listening, acquiring new lexicons, learning through missteps, and treating people with dignity and respect (2018, 2-7). At its core, relational interviewing recognises the humanity of both the interviewer and the interviewee. In this article, we ask: Is it possible to achieve the same dignity and respect when collecting multiple structured responses via a digital platform? Is it possible to bring a feminist and decolonial ethos to mid-N studies, particularly with sensitive interlocutors?

We provide insights into how to balance undertaking remote, online questionnaires with an approach that allows for flexibility, engagement, and reflexivity with research constituents. The article offers suggestions about how to take the essence of Fujii's relational interviewing – a style that privileges the dignity of the interviewee – and expand it in a way that generates data that lends itself to mid-N comparison without losing its intimacy. We reflect on the "affective encounters" that take place when creating the enabling conditions to conduct questionnaires with at-risk participants. Finally, it offers insights about how to create connections and bonds of trust, even when research is digital and not immersive.[2] Overall, we found that collecting comparative data (for example, in an online questionnaire) can centre both feminist and decolonial research ethea, but require doing 'behind the scenes' work with research constituents beyond the data collection exercise itself.

In what follows, we use the case of our digital data collection project with high-risk leaders in Central and South America to highlight both how and why we designed the project to privilege feminist and decolonial research values. We also outline the challenges we faced along the way, and how we acted to overcome them and learn from them. Finally, we reflect on what this specific project can tell us about other projects that aim to generate comparable data, while also maintaining deep and human connections with interlocutors.

Designing a Feminist and Decolonial Data Collection Tool

One of the objectives of this project was to generate research that lends itself to comparative analysis, through creating a database based on online questionnaires with high-risk women leaders around the region. However, this project did not come without sampling challenges. The participants we aimed to include in our database – high-risk women leaders – are often hard-to-reach as they are time and resource poor; many also live in areas that are difficult to access either due to their remoteness and complicated security environments. They are, understandably, wary of engaging with researchers about their experiences of threats and violence. Many report suffering extreme burnout, and mental and emotional fatigue after prolonged periods of risky activism, often without significant change.

Given the sensitivities around data collection, as well as the values of the research team, the methods adopted in this project were designed to be feminist and decolonial in nature, as an attempt to prevent retraumatizing or unethical research practices (see Red de Organizaciones Femeninas del Pacifico Caucano Matamba y Guasa *et al.*, 2022). Indeed, as feminist researchers have written, "contesting extractive research starts with investing time and building relationships based on mutual trust and transparency" (ibid.). From the outset, it was important that even though the

2 For an in-depth discussion of the promises and pitfalls of 'digitalising' research in conflict zones, see (Mwambari, Purdeková, and Nyenyezi Bisoka 2022).

research methods used for this project were more 'hands off' than methods that typically afford close connections through individual, semi-structured interviewing, we (at times, inadvertently) built spaces for "vulnerable listening, respect and care" (ibid.) at different stages of the process. Such work mainly took place 'behind the scenes' – that is, in the efforts we made to create an environment that facilitated ethical data collection on a mid-N scale.

While significant efforts were made to design a data collection protocol that privileged women's safety above all, we found that on certain occasions, our assumptions about how women want to keep themselves safe were different from their own preferences. Thus, after outlining the *why* and *how* of designing this project, we also reflect on the realities of conducting this digital fieldwork, and what this can teach us not only about women high-risk leaders themselves, but also about our understanding of what makes (or can make) digital data collection feminist and decolonial. The process of designing the methods for this research project can shed light on how to ethically engage with other populations of high-risk participants, while also generating data that lends itself to comparative analysis.

Deciding on digital data collection.

The timeline for the broader project intersected with the global Covid-19 pandemic. While research was due to begin in March 2020, the project was postponed until October 2021. During this time, however, feminist scholars and practitioners reflected on what data collection could look like in a changing context of fieldwork (see Zulver, Cookson and Fuentes, 2021; Howlett, 2022; Marzi, 2023b, 2023a). Beyond academic scholarship, international organisations designed guidance on how to conduct ethical research with vulnerable subjects from a distance. For example, in 2020 UN Women published a 'decision tree' to "[help] organisations with violence against women programmes, national statistical offices, policymakers, and researchers decide when and how to best collect data on women's experiences of violence [...]" (UN Women 2020). While this tree was largely based on the assumption that women might be at home with potential perpetrators of violence, and largely designed to understand patterns of violence against women and girls (VAWG) – and relatedly, service provision – during national lockdowns, it provides a useful framework to reflect on how to prioritise women's safety and ethically in processes of data collection (ibid).

Given the precarious - and dangerous - contexts in which women leaders in Latin America live and work, it was essential that this project include a closed database - created via an online questionnaire - as a way to ensure women's physical and emotional safety. Allowing women to respond online in the privacy of their own homes, on their own time, without having to speak directly about trauma to a stranger would allow respondents to choose the safest moments and spaces to answer a questionnaire on their smartphones.[3,4] By safest moments, we refer to times when women – who we recognise as experts in their own local security environments – were able to assess that they were not being monitored or overlooked by potential purveyors of violence. As the questionnaire was written, we were able to eliminate the risk of women being overheard when speaking about sensitive subjects via video or audio call or messages.

In what follows, we outline how the online questionnaire instrument was designed, and how the data collection phase played out in practice. Indeed, we hope that the lessons learned both in the design and data collection phases of this project offer insights that go beyond researchers' assumptions about what women want, and how women keep themselves safe. Insights like these are another way to bring feminist 'closeness' to more distant methods, like online, structured data collection.

3 Much of this design process was influenced by conversations and thought–partnership the PI engaged in with her colleagues at Ladysmith while they designed and launched *Cosas de Mujeres*, a Whatsapp-based data for development intervention run in the context of Venezuelan mass migration to Colombia. See (J. M. Zulver, Cookson, and Fuentes 2021).

4 For more reflections on using smartphones in fieldwork, see (Truong et al. 2020).

The Design Phase

Designing the Online Questionnaire

This article details how we built a database on women's high-risk leadership through an online questionnaire. The questionnaire was conducted remotely with 100 women leaders in seven countries between late 2022 and mid-2023.[5] The focus countries were selected due to the elevated risks present for social leaders and human rights defenders. Reports from Front Line Defenders, Global Witness, and the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders over previous years report Latin America as being the most dangerous region in the world for human rights defenders. Colombia, Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Venezuela, and Brazil consistently figure amongst the countries with the highest number of murders of human rights defenders, not only in the region, but globally. Activists and academics writing for the King's College London *Feminist Perspectives* blog note that "social transformation expands through the creation of relationships that are based on care, solidarity, respect, mutual support, and generous knowledge exchange" (Red de Organizaciones Femeninas del Pacifico Caucano Matamba y Guasa et al., 2022).

Indeed, our own research team was inspired by the idea of how practices of relationality can allow us to imagine feminist and decolonial social science research that moves beyond box-ticking exercises when it comes to ethical approvals and positionality statements in articles.[6] By this, we refer to ethical protocols, risk assessments, and even submissions to international journals that require reflection on how the researcher intends to protect the 'research subject'. In this project, we aimed to go beyond paternalistic ideas about how we can protect, in order to begin two-way conversations about what safety looks like and implies for those research constituents living in chronic situations of violence. Such an objective required extra work: going beyond simply identifying respondents, assigning an enumerator, and ensuring the questionnaire had been filled. Rather, we engaged in 'behind the scenes' work that included phone calls, Whatsapp audio messages, and follow up calls to create trust with interlocutors to the extent that they felt confident and comfortable responding to the online questionnaire candidly (see also Vitale, 2021).

The questionnaire itself was designed based on a series of life history interviews the PI conducted with 43 women in three countries, as well as hundreds of interviews she has undertaken in the context of past research projects with high-risk activists. These life histories followed semi-structured interview guidelines designed to elicit responses to the broader research questions around understanding women's high-risk leadership. The fluid nature of these original interviews (Rapley 2004) provided space for interviewees to guide and shape the narratives that were being shared about their leadership. Based on the responses from these interviews, we began to collate categories of responses related to: previous experiences with leadership, risks and violence experienced, motivations for leadership, and protection needs and practices. Some of the questions were closed, while others offered space to insert qualitative reflections. For example, one question asked: "Do you have previous experience with leadership roles?" Respondents could answer affirmatively, negatively, or with "I'd prefer not to answer." If they responded affirmatively, the questionnaire automatically asked them "Could you please describe your experience of previous leadership", and offered a box with space to input their answers. Given the University of Oxford's data protocols, we used Microsoft Forms (which we ensured was accessible on mobile phones). The questionnaire was made available in both Spanish and Portuguese.

Based on what women said in the previous semi-structured interviews, the PI designed the

5 At the time of writing (early 2024), and at the request of a group of women leaders in Ecuador, we have further disseminated the questionnaire to include their experiences of leadership, under the country's state of emergency.

6 For a discussion on the ethical pitfalls of sensitive research – indeed, those that extend beyond the bounds of university ethics boards – see (Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018).

questionnaire questions to facilitate capturing broader patterns within the region. The intention of the exercise was the widen the net –both in terms of numbers of leaders, and geographical context – to include more high-risk leadership experiences in a format that facilitates comparative analysis, including in countries outside of her area of focus. By using an online questionnaire, we hoped to gather both qualitative and quantitative data. Indeed, we use the term 'questionnaire' instead of 'survey' to signal that we do not intend to conduct statistical analysis on the data, however, we do intend to use it for in-depth qualitative analysis and to generate descriptive statistics.

Selecting Leaders

To select leaders to include in the database, three criteria were established. Each of the identified individuals needed: (1) to currently participate in a social movement, (2) to identify as a woman leader, and (3) to operate in a context of risk. Each of these is discussed below.

First, each participant needed to be engaged in civil society activism. Given existing work on violence against women in politics, we did not include any women involved in formal politics in the database, as the dynamics of violence here are slightly different (see Krook, 2020). Second, each participant needed to identify a leader. Within feminist research on social movements, there is an understanding that leadership structures are not always hierarchical, and that there is not always one leader in each organisation (Gargallo Celentani 2012). With that said, previous work with women's civil society organisations often reveals that there is generally one individual who others see as "the leader" within an organisation (J. Zulver 2022). Accordingly, to meet this criterion, selected participants needed to have a public-facing role, and to either consider themselves – or be pointed to by others – as leaders. For the sake of participants' safety, each of the identified leaders needed to have some sort of publicly available news story, social media post, or similar about them easily accessible via the internet. We used this metric of other publications because the important element was to find recognised leaders who would not need to take on a new level of recognition for participating in this research. We assume that public recognition meant that these activists were likely already on the radars of violent actors and thus, that they were aware of the risks in their actions, thus allowing them to consent in a manner we consider to be ethically and morally responsible.[7] Finally, each of the identified participants needed to be a high-risk leader, meaning that their role within the social movement puts them in a certain level of danger. In order to operationalise 'risk', each of the participants needed to have received some sort of threat by a violent actor. The questionnaire itself asked for more details about the nature of the threats and/or violence that each participant had experienced, although these responses were optional, in case participants did not want to disclose. While we did not provide psychological follow-up for participants, as discussed below, we kept the option for ongoing communication open.[8]

Convening a Research Team with Local Connections

Clearly, there are historical, social, economic, and political differences between and specificities related to the seven countries included in this study. Furthermore, these are not necessarily all countries in which the PI has an academic history of research. Thus, to ensure that we could ethically engage in this research, reach leaders via established and trusted networks, and account for an analysis that takes into account these contextual details, four research assistants either based in, and/or with a significant history of conducting feminist research in Guatemala, Honduras, Venezuela, and Brazil were hired. As the PI has engaged in research in Colombia, Mexico, and El Salvador, she identified, contacted, and ensured the completion of the questionnaires in these three countries by herself.

7 See the section on "strategic visibility" in (J. Zulver 2021).
8 For a discussion of when/if our ethical obligations *end* in the field, see (Knott 2019).

All members of the team identity as feminist. While certain power asymmetries between team members and participants remain –for example, in Guatemala, the RA lives in the capital, while many participants live in rural, principally Indigenous areas[9] – we hoped that closing certain kinds of distance (language and accent, location, some shared cultural experience) would find a morally acceptable balance to the insider/outsider "conundrum" (Parashar 2019; Savvides et al. 2014).

After an induction meeting where the project objectives were explained to the RAs, we began to create a shortlist of women leaders. RAs were encouraged to source diverse participants, including those representing different ethnic and racial backgrounds, sexual orientations and gender identities, ages, and geographic locations. While the PI designed the questionnaire based on her previous research, the RAs were active participants in the design of how and with whom to implement it (see Parashar, 2019 on "research brokers"). All of the potential participants were input in an encrypted database that explained how they filled the three criteria, and included a link to an article or publicly available post about them. The preliminary shortlist was reviewed by the PI, who finalised the list of leaders to be contacted, in conversation with each RA.

The Data Collection Phase

The process of gathering data was as follows: after ensuring that the identified leaders met the three criteria, researchers drew on our established in-country networks to contact leaders, by Whatsapp (in most cases, although by Signal or Telegram in others), phone call, social media, or email. After introducing themselves and the project and receiving confirmation that the leaders wanted to participate, we sent an information sheet in Spanish or Portuguese, and then sent them a link to an online questionnaire, using Microsoft Forms. We outlined the types of questions the questionnaire would include, and then gave them an opportunity to ask any questions they might have about the project, and asked them to let us know when they had submitted their responses. The majority of the women we contacted expressed that they felt comfortable receiving information via Whatsapp, as well as the follow-up and notification of what was sent, as these made conversations more fluid and easy. As we will discuss in the following section, often there were long and drawn-out negotiations about the objectives of the project before respondents agreed to participate.

The online questionnaire provided options for those with lower levels of literacy or with limited access to mobile internet (for example, in the case of Venezuela); in certain cases RAs offered to fill in the questionnaire for participants, reading them the questions over the phone and inputting their answers. For the most part, however, participants opted to complete the questionnaire alone, which we believe offered a level of privacy that facilitated openness about responses related to sensitive subjects.

Learning from Challenges Encountered while engaging in Digital Data Collection with High-Risk Informants

While the design phase of the project drew on existing feminist methods that privileged respondents' physical and mental safety, aimed to avoid extractivist research practices, and endeavoured to build-in spaces for reflection, our team still encountered unexpected challenges. We do not take these as a sign of failure in our design or research collection. Rather, we agree with the authors of the *Feminist Perspectives* blog that (feminist) research is about "entanglements, relationships, and unexpected outcomes" (2022). In what follows, we separate these "unexpected outcomes" into three central challenges. These challenges, intrinsic to the socio-political and security circumstances in the countries under study, define the difficulties in access and participation of some of these women in our research. These

9 See also, reflections on the tensions that emerge when "home" becomes the "field" in digital research (Konken and Howlett 2023).

categories are: (1) digital isolation of women leaders, (2) threat response inhibitors, and (3) the 'bigger picture' question.

Digital Isolation

Firstly, the digital isolation of certain women leaders represents a challenge to data collection. The presence of structural conditions beyond the scope of our project has resulted in obstacles in communicating with local leaders whose activities could have a crucial impact in certain geographic areas. Indeed, as we knew that our project involved access to a smartphone, we were not able to include those women who do not have access to these devices. Beyond lack of access to a phone, however, we found other isolation issues: one woman in the Colombian Amazon was only able to communicate via WhatsApp when she travelled to a nearby town and had an internet signal. She would sometimes remain *incognito* for days, and would then reappear when she was no longer in her isolated village. In cases like these, patience was key. We intentionally gave ourselves a long timeline to collect this data, so that we could guarantee we would collect a range of experiences without rushing interlocutors.

In the case of Venezuela in particular, we had ongoing struggles with lack of internet access, or with participants who could not afford expensive internet packages for their phones. In cases when women were unable to afford data, we sometimes sent payments for them to purchase internet packages. As the Research Assistant explained, in Venezuela it is not uncommon for service providers to have "caídas" (blackouts), which can leave the population out of communication for hours. Venezuela has one of the slowest internet connections in Latin America. Indeed, a study published by Caleidoscopio Humano and Monitor de Derechos Económicos, Sociales, Culturales y Ambientales (Caleidoscopio Humano 2020) notes that connectivity in Venezuela is so bad that it has become a limiting factor for human development, and infringes on rights including the freedom of expression, the right to be informed, and the right to work. When connectivity is limited or non-existent, women's rights and human rights activists are particularly vulnerable; they are unable to register cases of abuse and harassment and are restricted in their ability to seek information.

Beyond a lack of internet connection, some women leaders do not have mobile phones due to a lack of resources. We are aware that using digital data collection methods thus isolates certain leaders in the countries in which we work, whose experiences would undoubtedly be important to include in our database. To address this profile of "shadow" leadership, it would be necessary to consider the alternative of moving to the areas where these women exercise their militancy, although this could entail considerable risks for our researchers.

Threat Response Inhibitors

Secondly, we identified a challenge related to "threat response inhibitors". In turbulent and tense political environments, many women leaders live under the constant threats of wiretapping, intimidation by armed groups, and fear of reprisals by state apparatuses, including security forces. Under this climate of hostility, a significant number of women leaders choose not to respond to questionnaires when we approached them. In this context, we take non-response not as a rejection of our invitation, but as influenced by a climate of persecution and threats in their local context.

Wariness of engaging with strangers presented additional challenges in establishing contact with grassroots women leaders. From the beginning, contacting these women was a delicate process, as they are individuals who have been threatened or attacked – indeed, this was one of the reasons why we wanted to contact them and include them in our analysis. Their willingness to engage with unknown parties (our team) brought to the table the need to be skilful and empathetic in presenting the objectives of the project and our intention with the questionnaire. Indeed, these soft skills were fundamental to the 'behind the scenes' work that facilitated the broader data collection process.

For example, during our initial mapping, it was difficult to locate and contact Garifuna women leaders in Honduras, which also shows that

there is little articulation or communication with women fighting in Garifuna territories. In this population in particular, women felt distrustful at the beginning of the contact via Whatsapp, and they asked for more information and some even asked for communication via phone call or Zoom to talk about the study and also to talk about their experience, their experiences and the intimidation they had lived through. Indeed, we found one of the most important factors to overcoming initial barriers to participation was around creating emotional bonds of trust. In a politically adverse and threatening context, the process of answering the questionnaires went beyond simply answering structured questions. Women leaders used initial phone conversations or messages as an opportunity not only to share their political perspectives and experiences of activism, but also to release emotions, express personal experiences, and vent in a safe environment.

This situation of needing to be flexible in how we 'got closer' before moving towards more structured methods characterised our overall study. That is, in order to obtain objective, genuine, and truthful testimony – even in a structured and comparative manner –, it was necessary to generate a priori conversational conditions that are usually clearly distanced from what is understood as necessary in dispassionate or neutral interviewer-interviewee contexts. Thus, while filling in the questionnaire itself was not necessarily an "affective encounter", the process leading to and following its submission was (Parashar, 2019, 254). This emotional dimension, reflected in women leaders' need for relief, underlines the limitation of purely quantitative approaches to understanding grassroots leadership in challenging contexts, and to collecting data in a feminist and decolonial manner. Indeed, Sara Ahmed writes about how through the "work of listening to others, of hearing the force of their pain and the energy of their anger… an attachment is made" (Ahmed, 2004 188). Although at face value, the method of using an online questionnaire does seem to require an emotional connection, we argue that affective encounter *are* necessary in order to create the enabling conditions for its collection. Indeed, we overwhelmingly found that such affective encounters were (implicitly or explicitly) requested by interlocutors (Parashar, 2019, 255).

The concept of 'venting' becomes theoretically relevant in this context, and refers to the expression of emotional states, the search for relief, and the manifestation of intimate experiences. "Desahogo" (in Spanish) or "venting" is translated as the relief of sorrow, pain, or affliction. Indeed, in the Royal Spanish Academy of Language, it refers to 'widening, dilation, spreading out'. By finding ways to incorporate *desahogo* into our methods, the answers to the questionnaires were accompanied by anecdotes, testimonies, and in-depth confessions that reflected the emotional and psychological complexity inherent in these women's lives. Such testimonies either came in parallel, through offline phone calls or messages, and then in the open-ended question boxes that we purposefully built into the questionnaires themselves.

The 'bigger picture' question

Finally, we identified challenges related to resisting participation due to a lack of change over time, or a weariness related to the 'bigger picture' question. In some instances, we were confronted with discouragement, hopelessness, or despondency by the women leaders we contacted. These women highlighted the ongoing nature of their problems in a context where circumstances do not show improvement and sometimes even worsen. They questioned the usefulness and direct benefits of participating in research of this nature. Often, the considerable workload that these leaders carry in their communities leads them to prioritise managing resources and space over the investment of time in responding to questionnaires. We found that the perception of neglect at the international level also plays a role in the lack of incentive to collaborate in such studies, highlighting the importance of addressing the emotional dimension of data collection.

This process of gathering testimonies also highlighted the lack of international recognition for these grassroots leaders, particularly women. Despite the risks inherent in their roles in their respective communities, they also face an emotional risk of not being heard beyond their

milieu of struggle. Even well after submitting their questionnaires online, many of them expressed a desire to maintain contact, request updates, and collaborate on the project, predilections that underscore the importance of providing a space for their voices in the global arena. As a team, we had ongoing conversations about how to moderate expectations (around participation) and avoid extractivist research dynamics. We also discussed how to ensure that the results are disseminated back to the research constituents; we are currently preparing an informational video of the questionnaire results which we will share on social media, and of course, with the interview respondents.[10]

Lessons about Doing Structured Feminist, Decolonial Research Online

In sum, the process of data collection in the High-Risk Women Leaders in Latin America project shines a light on the interconnectedness between the initial challenges of access, the emotional dimension in interactions, and the importance of recognising neglected voices in the cross-national context. While it is essential to generate comparative information about this population, such exercises do not necessarily need to be dispassionate, academically neutral, or prohibit fostering closeness. Indeed, we argue that, in some cases, it is not possible to gather useful information *unless* such feminist and decolonial closeness is incorporated into the data collection process.

The process of designing and applying an online questionnaire tool was intended to follow a feminist and decolonial approach to social sciences research that aims to centre the voices and experiences of women, be flexible to their conditions at the moment of surveying, and prioritise respondents' safety over all else. Even though the objective was to use a method that does not generally facilitate closeness (a structured, one-directional questionnaire filled-in remotely), the 'behind the scenes' work undertaken by the research team created the conditions apt for accessing sensitive information, while also generating sufficient responses to engage in mid-N comparative analysis. It centred a *do no harm* approach that prioritised women's agency without negating the possibility of creating a database of responses we will now comparatively analyse.

When it comes to questions of how decolonial our project actually is, we are aware of the limitations of our approach. We are aware that a written question-response exercise falls well within the scope of a traditional, Western, colonial approach to research. Indeed, we have reflected on the work of Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), who asks us to think about which ways Indigenous ways of knowing have been represented, who tells other people's stories, and in which languages? Following these questions, it is difficult to argue that our selected method is fundamentally decolonial in nature.

Moreover, we are aware that one of the risks of distance research is exacerbating top-down the power dynamics associated with (colonial) knowledge production (see Mwambari, Purdeková and Nyenyezi Bisoka, 2022, 974). For example, some caution that online research in conflict zones risks reduces the complexity of social phenomena, and risks omitting lived experiences of violence (Mwambari, Purdeková and Nyenyezi Bisoka, 2022, 970). In this article, however, we highlight the ways in which trust-building and "contexting" do not need to be categorically or "vitally eclipsed in online exchanges and platforms" (ibid., 970). We agree with these authors that the method has epistemological limitations; in this article, however, we aim to highlight attempts – however imperfect – to overcome some of these limitations through feminist design. Put simply, we contend that *design matters* and that while a project may not be – in itself – decolonial, there is value in creating room to (re)engage in these conversations throughout the process of research.

Moreover, this element of the project (that is, the online questionnaire) does not take place in isolation; rather, it is part of a broader research agenda that incorporates multiple methods, including *in-situ* ethnographic research. Thus, while participants in the questionnaire will not be involved

10 At the time of writing, data analysis is still underway, which is why the video has not yet been disseminated.

in the data analysis itself, the data will be shared back to them. To provide one illustrative example of how we put the questionnaire in conversation with other attempts at returning research (see Knott, 2019), the PI conducted in-person qualitative research with one of the Indigenous participants in this survey, and then translated her findings from English to Spanish, and then, through hiring her daughter as a research assistant, back into Me'phaa, her first language. This process was requested by the participant, in an ongoing conversation about how to ensure that the research would be useful to her and her community.

As outlined, the process of collecting the data – the stories of women's leadership experiences – gave rise to certain unexpected challenges. Whereas we thought that offering a private space (one's phone) to respond to an online questionnaire would be less intrusive, and that more women would feel more open to talking about experiences of violence outside of a conversation that naturally involves power imbalances, many women actually wanted to discuss the *experience of* the questionnaire, both before and after filling it in. Thus, while digital data collection facilitated a certain level of privacy – and offered the agency to allow women to respond on their own schedule, and in their own space – we learned that when discussing high-risk leadership, some women wanted more direct contact. They were looking for more closeness and solidarity, rather than more isolation (which we had previously framed as privacy, and therefore safety). Thus, in order to collect remote information from these women at a distance, we first needed to find creative ways to connect and get close.

Finally, the behaviour of the grassroots leaders after completing the questionnaire yields insights into how we will now assess the quality of the information collected. After each interaction, the protocol involved confirming that the questionnaire had been completed successfully, with no major problems or outstanding questions. However, in most cases, this 'confirmation contact' did not mark the end of communication between women leaders and our team. In all the countries where the study has been carried out, women leaders expressed great interest in maintaining ongoing contact with the project team via messages. In the case of Honduras, the Garifuna women specifically asked for more connection; the PI and the RA working on Honduras amended the ethics approvals they had secured in order to carry out virtual semi-structured interviews with certain participants, and a separate research paper is now underway. These women and other leaders sought to stay informed about the progress of the research and actively offered to organise online meetings, both with our team and with other leaders in their respective countries, with the purpose of establishing networking opportunities. These meetings are being organised at the time of writing. For the research team, this 'behind the scenes' and 'after the fact' work is as important as the 'front of house' work (the questionnaire responses), as it first creates the close conditions and affective encounters necessary to then distance ourselves with a digital data collection tool.

In all, this article has presented reflections on a digital data collection project that aimed to generate a mid-N number of responses without losing the feminist and decolonial ethea inherent to the broader research agenda. We detail how we designed the project in a way to generate the appropriate closeness for collecting sensitive information, while recognising that an online questionnaire inherently involves a level of distance. To conclude, we want to be clear that the data generated in their project is not intended to be collected, nor analysed in isolation, but rather, in conversation with ethnographic methods and insights. We further argue that 'getting bigger' in terms of the number of responses, does not necessarily mean that feminist and decolonial insights must be discarded. Finally, we aim to show through describing our own experience how these insights can be included iteratively throughout the research design process.

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Talking to Elites: A Guide for Novice Interviewers

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Elite interviewing is one of the most frequently employed qualitative research methods in political science. Talking to elites allows researchers to detect any decision making process, trace the policy process of key events, garner insider information, and unravel complex mechanisms. Some level of confidence and skill is often required in quality elite interviewing, but there is no trusted guide for novice interviewers. Based on my experience of interviewing politicians, government officials, and political party leaders as a graduate student, I provide a holistic approach to elite interviews by drawing insights from my experience and other methods such as participation observation. In this article, I aim to acknowledge the challenges of elite interviews as a graduate student, junior faculty, or scholar with limited experience in interviewing and offer some guidance and recommendations before and after the conduct of interviewing.

I want to start by defining elite interviewing, which is quite an elusive concept despite the elite's role in political science research. Following Richards (1996, 199), I define elites as "a group of individuals, who hold, or have held, a privileged position in society and, as such, as far as a political scientist is concerned, are likely to have had more influence on political outcomes than general members of the public." Given this, elite interviewing is an extremely potent tool that every researcher should keep in their toolbox. Whether by itself or even accompanying a larger project with another methodological approach (like site intensive methods or quantitative regression analysis), elite interviewing allows us to get insights that are not accessible through our data and unravel new mechanisms that are not known to the researcher.

Although elite interviews are foundational to our research, mainstream accounts often lack critical insights for novice interviewers, and this research often assumes some sort of prior knowledge and skills when talking to elites.[1] More importantly, elite interviewing is not addressed adequately in the Ph.D. curricula, especially in the Northern American graduate education. First, most graduate programs do not have any substantive methodology course for qualitative approaches (Emmons and Moravcsik 2020). Graduate students learn little about qualitative work, let alone work on elite interviews. Second, programs with qualitative research courses cannot adequately prepare graduate students and young scholars to conduct elite interviewing in real life. Often these courses cram various methodological approaches into a few weeks and offer shallow information on each topic, letting students explore these subjects independently. Exercises in or out of the classroom

1 Major exception to this statement would be Berry's (2002) article on elite interviews.

involving interviewing might benefit students to develop the habits of a qualified interviewer but will not guarantee confidence and expertise. So, for novice interviewers, elite interviewing can become a steep curve to overcome. I believe the following recommendations and discussion of elite interviewing are highly beneficial to graduate students, junior scholars, or people new to elite interviewing to minimize their mistakes and increase their research's internal and external validity.

Before the Interviews

Research ethics board is your best friend! After deciding that elite interviews is the best empirical approach to collecting necessary data, several things need to be considered. Recruitment of interviewees, consent process, conduct of interviews, and data information retention are some of the essential steps that one must think about before starting their field research. A review process conducted by research ethics committees (e.g., Institutional Review Board in the US) is the first step that any researcher should go through to ensure the safety of the researcher and subjects and the quality of their scholarly work.

Preparing necessary documents and answering questions about the research protocol, interviewee safety, conduct of interviews, mechanisms to contact interviewees, mechanisms of anonymity, information storage that ensures anonymity, recruitment methods and texts, and the consent process enable inexperienced researchers to have a good spiel prepared for the actual interviewing process. Thinking about these details not only ensures interviewer and interviewee safety and meets the standards of good research, but it also prepares researchers for fieldwork.

If it is your first time going through the ethics board, the process can take considerable time to prepare these documents and think through these details. Depending on the institution and the context these interviews take place, the board might not be familiar with fieldwork research or ask for more detailed information. So, I recommend talking to other faculty members and colleagues with fieldwork research experience about their ethics board process, what to expect and prepare. Your institution's ethics committee website is the most useful tool in prepping these documents, but an extensive Google search is also essential in navigating material preparation.

Let's talk about money! Conducting elite interviews is sometimes solo empirical research, but it can also be combined with another qualitative or quantitative research component. No matter what, how and where these interviews are conducted is important. If elites are politicians and government actors, it is often expected of the researcher to be present in the field and accommodate the location preferences of these individuals. Some scholars prefer face-to-face interviews but opt for telephone/e-mail/online interviews at the respondent's request (Harvey 2011; Howlett 2022). Respondents sometimes appreciate the flexibility of conducting these interviews through telephone or mail. Not to mention, this sort of interviewing is a low-cost approach, given the limited resources graduate students work with.

My suggestion is to give priority to the interviewee's preferences and accessibility and accommodation issues. In cases I interviewed politicians and bureaucrats, it was almost always expected of me to be present in the city where they operate, and online interviewing was out of the question. One major benefit of in-person interviewing is immersive research, where the researcher has access to insights from observing behavior, understanding the location, and engaging with individuals on the periphery, especially elites' assistants or administrative aides. For example, one of my interviews with a political party leader in Turkey was insightful since an in-person meeting allowed me to enter the party building, meet with several members of the party and administrative crew, garner print materials related to the topic of research, and get invitation for related party meetings and rallies. Such an immersive experience would not be possible if the interview was conducted online or through phone.

So, if possible, securing a research grant through internal or external sources would greatly benefit the researcher in expediting the interview and gaining further insights about the field and subject. Many political science organizations

have dissertation grants, think tanks and research organizations offer funds to conduct research, and most schools have specialized bodies for graduate students to learn more about internal and external funding for conducting research involving elite interviews and fieldwork visits.

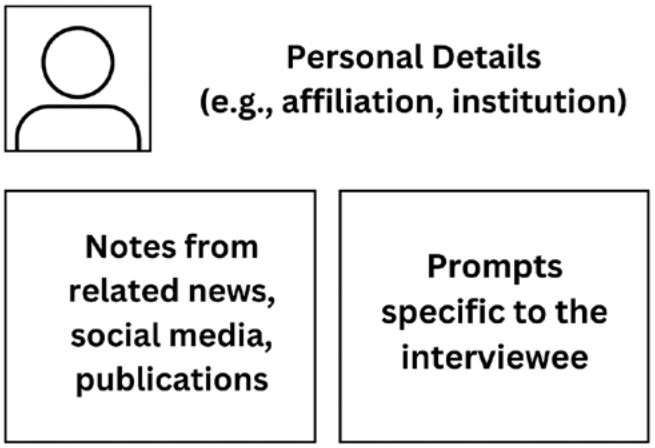
Get your tools ready! Another important aspect of elite interviews is the tools that you are using. A device for voice recording (if allowed by the interviewee), a small notebook and pen to take notes, a consent form approved by the ethics committee, small print of your interview questions, your business card, and your laptop/tablet are a few necessary items to keep by yourself all the time. Depending on your day and schedule, bringing snacks and water would not hurt if you had back-to-back interviews.

If allowed, audio recording is okay with elite interviews. Remember, giving their personal and professional comments and talking to the media about their ideas are routine tasks for elites. If elites wish to share their honest opinions, they may prefer not to have the interview recorded. In such cases, it is crucial for new interviewers to be aware of this and prepared for the situation. Also, investing in a good recorder also creates a professional look. Using your phone might create credibility and trust issues for the interviewee in fragile contexts. You may not have access to your audio recorder or your phone during the interview. In one of my interviewees, I was conducting an interview at the Grand National Assembly in Turkey, which allows only journalists to carry audio recorders. Also, my interviewee did not prefer to use a smartphone to record the meeting. So, the old-fashioned notepad became quite useful. In these instances, do not panic or fear that you will be missing out a lot. After the interview, sit down and spend some time writing down your notes from the interview. You might not be able to get some verbatim insights, but you could still use these interviews in detail.

Do your homework! One essential part of the interview preparation is getting to know the interviewees. If available, get to know your interlocutor in detail by going over their online presence, public statements, projects or publications, and news or research related to these people. Personal websites and social media[2] can benefit the researcher with further questions to integrate into the interview and probes. If possible, the online interactions of these people can help trace personal relationships and additional contacts for future interviews. I recommend taking extensive notes about the individual and preparing flashcards about the person before the interview.

Similarly, Berry (2002) recommends careful examination of the interviewee before the interview to avoid any potential problems and configure unique questions for the person you are interviewing. Figure 1 provides an example flashcard that can be used to take notes about the interviewee prior to interviews to avoid any bloopers. Bloopers might indicate a lack of interest and an unprofessional approach to the topic and might irk the interviewee. Knowing your interviewee, however, results in a quality interview, professionalization, and an increase in the interviewer's trust.

Figure 1. Flashcard example



2 In my personal experience with Turkish elites, I found that they frequently use Twitter. However, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, or other venues are not preferred. It is important to note that the choice of social media can change depending on the political context. For instance, in some Latin American countries, political elites frequently use TikTok to promote their policy agenda (Bergengruen 2023). Similarly, in some Asian countries, Facebook and Twitter are essential in political campaigns (Tapsell 2021).

You are a researcher, not a graduate student! Like all fieldwork research, the researcher's positionality carries great importance for elite interviewing. Embracing the researcher identity when conducting these interviews is necessary, especially for graduate students; it is crucial to remind yourself that you are not a graduate student but a researcher in the field. Graduate students and junior faculty members can suffer from imposter syndrome, which might affect the quality of their research. However, gauging subtle aspects of the elite view of the world requires confidence and experience (Harvey 2011). Feeling inferior or not worthy or doubting your abilities can threaten your research's internal and external validity. Additionally, the power imbalance between the interviewer and interviewee can grow exponentially, especially if the interviewer is a graduate student. Furthermore, in most contexts, gender and cultural roles are critical in positionality and dynamics between the interviewer and interviewee and can exacerbate the fragility of the researcher. This sort of imbalance impacts not only the quality of the interview but also the experience of being a researcher for the interviewer (Boucher 2017).

Another positionality issue is how you present yourself. It is common to adopt shifting positions in interviewing to garner more insights and adapt to unpredictable situations and evolving contexts.[3] This will generate high quality responses and can even increase the likelihood of your interviewees referring you to additional contacts (mainly if you are relying on snowball technique). The researcher's positionality can be a blessing and a curse. For instance, Glas (2021) reports that his position as a foreign researcher limited his access to European and North American elites while increased his chances with ASEAN officials. In my experience, religious male elites hesitated to talk to me in my interviews and had lower likelihood to respond positively to my cold calls. So, adopting shifting positions can benefit the researcher to land an interview and extract crucial insights.

However, it is also important to note that elites are often a close circle of people, and shifting positions might change people's ideas about the researcher's credibility and the research itself. If the interviewee's credibility is in danger, the interview quality can be affected, and the interviewee might not feel comfortable conducting an interview. So, always keep the social and political culture, gender and background, interviewees' gender and background, and political context in mind when conducting these interviews. This is also important in cases where the researcher is foreign to the political context and culture. Finally, remember, one of the characteristics of experienced interviewers is that they can easily understand whether the interviewee feels comfortable or not, and adjust their style as necessary.

Unveiling the power of your tool: Open-ended, semi-structured, or closed-ended questioning.[4] Getting in the door is the first and most crucial step of interviewing, but what you do in these interviews is far more important. Open-ended questioning is the riskiest but potentially most valuable and lucrative form of interviewing when it comes to elite interviews. Since open-ended questions prompt the interviewee to elaborate on issues, explore perspectives, and stimulate critical thinking, this form of interviewing can lead to more significant insights and information. However, open-ended questions require expertise in probing, building rapport, and formulating follow-up questions (Berry 2002). Hence, avoid this approach in elite interviews unless some confidence and experience is gained in interviewing.

Closed-ended questioning limits the response options, is quicker to conduct, controls the direction of the interview, and maintains control over the flow of information. This approach is most helpful if the research entails survey based research and insights or minute details are not central to the research. This approach can be highly beneficial in extracting systematic information from the elites and conducting quantitative analysis. In

3 I use shifting positions to refer to the researcher's ability and perspective to dynamically adapt to one's stance, involvement, and understanding while conducting research.

4 To have a better understanding of differences between structured, semi-structured, and unstructured approaches to interviewing, I recommend Brinkman (2014).

my opinion, semi-structured interviews are the most suitable and preferred approach to elite interviewing since there is some predefined structure, but the flexibility of the responses and prompts and probes are combined. Since each elite possesses unique insights about your topic, a semi-structured approach can benefit the researcher the most. The researcher can get systematic data on pre-established questions asked to all interviewees. The open-ended aspect of this approach allows researchers to dig deep, explore additional subjects, and encourage the interviewee to explore, elaborate, and share different perspectives.

Time, time, time! Unfortunately, elites have less time to spare for interviews, but interviewers need to gain the trust of their respondents to collect high quality data. The importance of timing and time of the interviews is something we do not learn in graduate school. First, elites are busy people and often have pre-determined schedules full of commitments (Peabody et al. 1990). It is often expected from the researcher to clarify the time needed to conduct the interview. So, always be prepared to give an answer to this question and be aware of your calendar.

Another issue is clear when asked for the expected length of the interviewee's appointment. The researcher's dilemma is a serious issue on this topic. If you ask for too much time, refusal to participate might become a serious issue. If you ask for too little time, the quality and quantity of the data might be in danger. So, how to find the perfect time? Short answer: It depends on your subject. Discussing these questions with your advisor or colleagues can provide insights into the ideal average expected time.

Ideally, you need at least 30 minutes to one hour to conduct a proper interview with elites, but more is also possible. When setting the appointment, I recommend asking for the time they can generously offer and accommodating that time. Lastly, your interviewee might want to make last minute changes to the interview's date, time, and even place. In these cases, it is essential to accommodate the elites' preferences since they often have busy schedules and commitments.

Where to find elites. Depending on your sampling process, your method for finding elites changes. The snowballing technique requires researchers to build rapport and ask the interviewee for recommendations. If a more structured sampling method is used, reaching out to the elites can be tricky. Cold calls are likely to result in denial. To increase the return rate, underscoring the importance of research and the contribution that the interviewee provides are essential during the recruitment process.

Additionally, the researcher does not communicate with the elite directly in most instances, but their assistants or communication personnel oversee setting the appointment. In these cases, we must remind ourselves that we are not the only people asking for these interviews. So, arranging a single interview can become quite tricky and time-consuming. It is common to make multiple phone calls/emails to arrange a single interview. So, be prepared to offer alternative times and dates.

Whether by email or phone call, a good spiel about the purpose of the interview and who you are should be ready (and often ethics boards ask for a copy of the recruitment text). Having a well-prepared script that outlines key information including who you are, where you are affiliated with, your research, aims of the research, expected length of the interview, and preferred time and date is the key.[5] If more information is needed, be prepared to provide it on the phone/e-mail quickly. I recommend creating drafts that include half-a-minute and one-minute versions of the interview request prior to making any calls or emails. If interviewees want to know the interview questions beforehand, be prepared to share them in the language required (again, ethics committees ask for the translated version of these documents if necessary).

One controversial point of view on finding the elites, especially initiating first contact points, is whether to use your network and people you know. There is no rule of thumb on this. I recommend not

5 See Appendix for example recruitment e-mail and phone call spiel.

using personal points of contact to reach elites for two reasons. First, acquaintances can oblige elites to respond positively back to the interview request and might result in reluctance, which can impact the quality of your research. Second, I believe being unable to reach people as a researcher is also significant data observation. This sort of situation can inform us about the availability and openness of the elites to these interviews. Using your network can increase the number of interviews conducted, but it does not guarantee quality in these meetings.

Lastly, I want to discuss the role of insiders and outsiders in elite interviewing. Not all elites are equal! Von Soest's (2023) work on expert interviews is influential on this point. Insiders have firsthand account knowledge and experience. They can easily misconstrue reality to protect their interests (Von Soest 2023). Outsiders offer more general information, assessment, and evaluation of the topic but lack detailed information and knowledge (Von Soest, 2023). Thus, he recommends combining both insider and outsider information when conducting expert interviews. When conducting elite interviews, similar insights can be made. Insider elites are likely to keep insider information or distort existing knowledge to protect their goals. Outsider elites can unravel further information and provide background for the elite decision and behavior. In my elite interviewing experience, I particularly benefited from outsiders (like consultants, communications aides, administrative assistants, or journalists) in understanding how elites behaved in certain ways.

After the Interviews

Know thyself! One of the things that I learned from my advisors is the use of fieldwork diaries extensively and how important they are in terms of reflexivity. If you are conducting more than one interview per day, it is possible to forget some details. Without critical thinking, you can also be prone to gloss over details or forego crucial cues. I recommend keeping a fieldwork diary to take notes about the interview, especially details that you cannot grasp through your recording: your feelings and observations before and after the interview, your interaction with the interviewee, and reflections from interactions, readings, and news. These fieldwork diaries are a crucial part of the interviews conducted. To respect the anonymity of the interviewees, it is crucial to keep these notes in a secure location.

More than words: Silences, interruptions, and lengthy monologues. Another thing I recommend is keeping a record of non-verbal cues and verbal details. There will be silences, laughter, rise or fall of tone, interruptions, and monologues in each interview. One might need to pay more attention to these details, which can provide critical insights into the quality of the interview and the research context. For instance, in some interviews with elites, I realized that some opposition actors lowered their voices on certain subjects, got closer to me when talking, or used cryptic language to maintain secrecy, privacy, and exclusivity. These details allowed me to understand the political context as well as the position of these interviews. A systematic analysis of these cues can also help us better understand the interview quality and insights. For example, keeping a record of these signals can be manageable using a table where the researcher keeps a tally of these cues.

Each interview is a chance to improve yourself. Each interview is quite useful for updating your information about your skills as a researcher and your research. For instance, thinking in-depth and critically about yourself as a researcher can improve your skills in wording, probes, prompts, and building rapport. I recommend taking note of what worked and did not work and your explanation of why it worked. An intensive study of your experience can help you to unravel interesting findings and is a great way of improving your skills.

Additionally, I prefer to send thank you messages or e-mails to the interviewee (if the phone number of the e-mail address is available) or to the initial point of contact. These thank you notes are crucial in appreciating the effort and time spent by the interviewee. This is important in continuing the rapport built during the interview and conducting future research. In most cases, you may not get a response back. However, in my personal experience, the responses I got back showed deep appreciation and respect.

Conclusion

To reiterate the general point of this article, elite interviewing is one of the most challenging empirical research projects, given that it requires interview and people skills. Simultaneously, this approach is one of the most rewarding tools, especially if unraveling key mechanisms is the key goal. If done properly, elite interviews can become one of the most useful tools in your research. I have addressed major issues to be aware of if you are especially conducting elite interviews for the first time. This applies to graduate students, junior scholars, and faculty new to the elite interviewing world. This paper provides necessary tools and helpful tips to prepare the researcher for the worst-case scenario. On a final note, it is essential to note that even the most experienced researchers will have difficulty in interviews. Therefore, novice interviewers should view initial frustrations or puzzlement as part of the learning process in building their skills in elite interviewing. Embracing these challenges will ultimately contribute to their growth and success in this valuable approach.

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Notes from the Field

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Walking the Terrains of Burma: Researcher Positionality in Immersive Fieldwork

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In the high-risk environment of authoritarian regimes, why do some people dissent while others do not? Specifically, what motivates some people to be the *first* to dissent when there is no safety in numbers, and no guarantee that others will join? The willingness of some individuals to seemingly disregard the high personal risk of dissent, evincing a readiness to bear significant costs, puzzles scholars in the social sciences. It is within this puzzle that my research question lies: *What factors motivate individuals to become first movers of dissent in an authoritarian country?* What are the characteristics and pathways that differentiate this extremely risk-tolerant subset of individuals from their peers?

This Note from the Field details the salience of researcher positionality based on a research project that drew on 68 semi-structured interviews, archival evidence, and secondary sources from the United States, Burma, and the United Kingdom to investigate first movers in Burma and their attempts to initiate dissent between 1988-2011. Fieldwork took place over five research trips to Burma between July 2017 and December 2019. I worked with eight local interpreters and research assistants. Based on my data, I found that some individuals who experienced a morally shocking politicizing event underwent different pathways to end up becoming devoted dissenters. Such pathways included experiences of political awakening and socialization, repeat experiences with dissent activities against the state, and repeat exposure to state repression and the consequent politicizing effects of such repression. This project's grounded theoretical claim is that "devoted dissenters"[1] who ultimately came to view participation in high-

1 I borrowed the term "devoted dissenter" from the "devoted actor" framework that was developed by scholars at Artis International to "better understand the social and psychological mechanisms underlying people's willingness to make costly sacrifices for a group and a cause" (Atran and Gómez 2018, e193). By devoted actors, they refer to "deontic (i.e., duty-based)" actors who "adhere to sacred, transcendent values that generate actions dissociated from rationally expected risks and rewards." 'Acts by devoted actors' are *not chiefly motivated by instrumental concerns*, or at least those of which people are usually aware. Instead, they are *motivated by sacred values* that drive actions independent from or all out of proportion to outlays and outcomes [emphasis added]." Their studies show that devoted actors, who are "unconditionally committed to sacred causes and whose personal identities are fused within a unique collective identity, willingly make costly sacrifices" (Atran 2016, S192). I used part of this framework to describe dissenters who were radicalized in part by repression who became extremely committed to their cause. But I decided to refrain from referring to them as radical dissenters because of the negative connotations of the term *radical* or *radicalized*. I adapted the "devoted actor" term and framework to my project and changed the term to "devoted dissenter" because my project focused exclusively on dissenters.

risk dissent to be in their self-interest are likely to become first movers of high-risk dissent. In other words, devoted dissenters who arrived at a point of gaining greater utility from participation than non-participation in high-risk dissent were likely to become first movers.

While my research was not explicitly focused on violence, I followed Russell Ramsey's (1973, 44) advice about scholarship in the context of Colombia: "The scholar who will *walk the terrain* [emphasis added] of Tolima, or Santander, or Boyacá, interview eyewitnesses, and exhaust local collections of letters and newspapers, will have the basis for a new level of sophistication in *violencia* scholarship." Heeding his advice, I fully immersed myself into the spaces and conversations I was invited to join throughout my doctoral fieldwork in Burma between 2017 and 2019.[2] Recognizing my social constructivist lens as a qualitative researcher, I needed to gain a rich understanding of Burmese culture. As an immersive researcher in the field, I "walked the terrain" of Yangon and Pakokku and attempted to "exhaust local collections" of journal entries, newspaper clippings, legal documents, old photos, and other memorabilia from past protests during interviews at people's homes and offices. In pursuit of discovering additional insights, I conversed with street vendors, students, teachers, taxi drivers, cashiers, relatives of interviewees, and other local residents to gain a finely tuned understanding of the social norms, dynamics among locals and between local-foreigner interactions, and the general ethos that drives human existence in Burma.

For a research project largely based on data collected via fieldwork and in-depth interviews, the researcher serves as a key instrument in data collection. In other words, since the field researcher is the vessel who extracts and collects information from interviewees, it is essential that the researcher is aware of how s/he is perceived by the target audiences and local environment. Her demeanor, voice, tone, personality, characteristics, appearance, likeability, and soft interpersonal skills collectively shape what kinds of information interviewees will provide to the researcher. Concerned that I would run out of time and not be able to interview as many subjects as I would like, I asked local Burmese scholars if they could interview some of my interviewees by following my interview guide and protocol, but all of them refused for the same reason. They all stated independently that *who* the interviewee is, *how* s/he is perceived, and *how* s/he creates the interview environment will significantly shape the type of responses that the interviewees will share. These conversations with local scholars reinforced my understanding that researcher positionality is a critical component of qualitative research. In counterfactual terms, even if I were to have had five different researchers follow the exact interview guide to interview the same subject, all five researchers may have collected slightly or significantly different material.

Hence, I remained vigilant of my identifiers, my general demeanor, and my understanding of how I was being perceived when I was in Burma. Word spreads fast in small cities, and Yangon and Pakokku were no different. Within days of being in each city, people were aware that a Korean-American Oxford doctoral student was conducting interviews about past protests with former political prisoners. On numerous occasions, I would walk into a cafe or restaurant and people would ask if I was the Korean-American Oxford researcher they had heard about.

My American nationality, Korean ethnicity, and institutional affiliation with Oxford University worked to my advantage to gain access to networks, conversations, and other human interactions that provided glimpses into people's lived experiences. The combination of these three identifiers benefited my relationships with interviewees as most people seemed positively inclined to trust me,

More substantively, I found that there was one major difference between the "devoted actor" framework and the "devoted dissenters" in my sample. The devoted actor hypothesis states that devoted actors are "willing to kill" to protect their sacred values, but I did not find this to be the case in my sample of interviewees. They were willing to risk their *own* lives in pursuit of creating a better society for their country but were not willing to kill others to achieve their goal.

2 My fieldwork and my dissertation were completed before the military coup that took place in February 2021.

let their guard down, and share more freely. This led interviewees to be generous with materials they shared with me during interviews, their time and networks, and often referred me to their colleagues for additional interviews.

The United States has a very positive image in Burma as a moral superpower, especially in the context of US-China competition, which I benefited from in my personal interactions. Many of my students who grew up under the Burmese military dictatorship learned English watching American TV shows and films and reading American novels they borrowed from the US Embassy's American Center as well as the British Council in Yangon.

Since Burma's opening in 2011, foreign countries and private companies made various investments in this country. Store fronts and restaurants of foreign brands were quickly built in Yangon and then into other cities.[3] I read opinion editorials in local magazines and newspapers disapproving of the latest Chinese company's infrastructure investment in hydropower dams, or a construction project which forced indigenous communities from their land. My students regularly shared with me pictures from protests they had attended to protest Chinese companies' exploitative practices and lack of consideration for local human rights when building their latest dam, commercial building, or roads. My students and local colleagues bemoaned China's outsized economic influence on domestic affairs, and shared their strong preferences for the US to invest more in their country so that the citizens and the Burmese government would more naturally want to ally with the US and other Western influences. Many of the people I met seemed to lionize the US, dreamt of studying abroad in the States, and repeatedly told me I was so fortunate to be an American.

In addition to my American nationality, my ethnicity unexpectedly placed me in an advantageous position for people to actively seek me out. South Korea's *Hallyu* or "Korean Wave" had swept through Burma since 2011 and has enormous soft power in Burma—probably second only to the United States—and people instantly warmed to me when they realized I was ethnically Korean. Younger interviewees or the children of older interviewees spoke Korean phrases to me that they learned from Korean television dramas. Young women showed me images of Korean male celebrities and told me they wanted to find husbands just like them. Several students I taught spoke in basic English, but fluent Korean.[4] One interviewee in Pakokku interrupted our interview to call his youngest daughter studying Korean language at a foreign language university in Mandalay so that she could demonstrate her Korean language fluency to me. Korean stores, K-pop music, and K-beauty makeup brands abounded in malls and open street markets. Passersby blatantly stared at me and would ask, "Korean?" If I nodded, people would brightly smile and greet me in Korean, often linking arms with me without asking, and give their phones to friends to take pictures with me.

Moreover, Burmese dissidents seemed to form an instant bond with me after learning about my ethnicity because all of them had a working familiarity with South Korea's history of dissent, anti-government mass demonstrations, state repression against dissidents, and the country's ultimate transition from a military dictatorship to a democracy in 1989. In my preambulatory remarks before starting any interview, I shared about my father's experience as a student activist in Seoul during the tumultuous pro-democracy protests in the mid-1980s, which led to his arrest along with

3 For instance, there was a two-story Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant in the center of Yangon for which people got dressed up nicely for to dine in. In the store window, there was a sign that read "Celebrating our 2nd year of opening this restaurant." The sign was updated annually to reflect how many years KFC had been open, which correlated closely with the number of years prior Burma had transitioned to a civilian-led government.

4 To embed myself in activist networks across Yangon, I taught public policy courses at Yangon School of Political Science (YSPS). The YSPS is an alternative school founded in 2011 by five Burmese former political prisoners and teaches social sciences to the children of former political prisoners, and other dissidents. I built a personal network of activists starting with the "88 Generation" (activists from the 1988 Uprising). Furthermore, I taught a course at the University of Yangon and I conducted seven interactive workshops on civic duties with various disenfranchised groups in the city, including Rohingya men and internally displaced persons.

many of his friends. Sharing this personal story instantly created a space between the dissidents and myself to trust each other more than we otherwise would if I had not shared that story.

My institutional affiliation with Oxford University and role as a doctoral researcher was helpful in building credibility and trust among interviewees and my burgeoning professional network in Yangon. While having been a closed society for decades, everyone seemed to know of Oxford University because it was the university that the well-known and widely beloved Aung San Suu Kyi attended. Having become accustomed to the onslaught of journalists and aid workers eager to conduct short interviews, some interviewees had memorized soundbites to share with foreign interviewers. In my interviews, I was clear that I wanted to ask open-ended questions as a thorough and trained researcher, and I wanted to really listen to what interviewees had to say.

My willingness to listen to what people had to say, to spend time with them, and then to answer whatever questions interviewees asked me further built trust between me and interviewees. Interviewee Ashin "Cricket" (an activist monk) explicitly pointed this out and said that I was different, because most foreigners who came to interview him and his fellow monks would rush in with no introduction, hurriedly ask their questions, and leave as soon as they collected what they needed.

No matter how impoverished they were, interviewees always offered me tea and often meals. Meals or snacks often comprised Burmese tealeaf salad *(lahpet thoke)*, fermented vegetables, generous portions of white rice, and pungent fermented fish paste. While serving, women often apologized with heads bowed that their offerings to a guest were insufficient, regretful that they could not offer more to a "Korean Oxford scholar."

I cannot overestimate how significant these three identifiers—American, Korean, Oxford—framed my interactions with people in the country. To minimize the mental and emotional distance created by a perceived imbalance of power between myself and my hosts, I tried to be a polite and modest guest. This meant wearing local clothing—often a longyi and a modest top with simple sandals—and eating nearly everything that was given to me, including meals offered by monks in their monasteries, which comprise the leftovers from monks' lunches that are completed before noon.

While I did not compensate interviewees for their time, I was attuned to the cultural sensitivities in Burma. I adhered to cultural norms by showing reverence to elders, being a respectful guest by bringing sweets and cakes to interviewees' homes and being respectful to monks and Buddhist rituals as a Christian. Furthermore, I spent significant time before and after the recorded interviews to converse with the interviewees, their family members who were present, and any friends or neighbors who may have been invited by the interviewees to sit in on the interviews. I played with children, chatted with visitors, went grocery shopping, and ran errands with relatives of interviewees, shared meals and tea, and cooked together.

This level of personal relationship-building was not a learned "research interview tactic" that I employed to gain people's trust. Rather, as a natural extrovert who enjoys meeting new people, I did not view nor treat interviewees merely as "research subjects," but rather as people with lived experiences who were sharing their stories, experiences, and outlooks to a complete foreign stranger (me). My upbringing in a Korean household with traditional Confucian values of respect for elders and age-based seniority, among other values, was instrumental in naturally code-switching for my interviews and off-the-record conversations.

I describe below five of many episodes in which my researcher positionality was relevant in my immersive fieldwork and shaped the comprehensive experience of collecting data.

Episode One: Minimizing the Cultural Distance between Me and My Interviewee to Create a Mutually Respectful Environment Conducive to a Productive Interview

Upon arrival in a monastery that took two hours to get to by motorbike from Pakokku, the monk I would interview gestured that I should eat, as I must be hungry from a long ride. (During our two-hour ride, my interpreter and I had to make a stop at a makeshift gas station, which comprised a few

dusty water bottles filled with used vegetable oil on top of a standalone wooden table. A young girl no older than eight or nine years old filled our rented motorbike's gas tank.) My Burmese interpreter and I sat down at the open table (this rural monastery had no doors, walls, electricity, nor plumbing), and I looked down to see half eaten rice, half-eaten potatoes in soy sauce, and oily curries that had bits of rice and dead gnats in them. One of the several stray dogs with open wounds on his face and belly sat next to me and licked my feet.

Smiling widely, the monk asked the interpreter if the meal was up to my standards as an "Oxford scholar." Refusing to offend the monk—a son of Buddha in the eyes of Buddhists, who was also the person I was going to interview, who allowed a non-Buddhist into his sacred space—I dove into my meal.

Episode Two: My Korean Identifier Assists with Eliciting Non-Opportunistic Kindness

While recognizing that Yangon and Pakokku are not representative of a country populated by over 135 ethnic groups speaking over 118 languages, I could not help but think that they could not be that much of an outlier. While walking down Merchant Street in downtown Yangon, a monsoon rain shower hit, triggering young men to race out of their homes to shower underneath rain gutters of their dilapidated homes. Without an umbrella, I ran towards the closest street vendor. By this point, I had mastered running in flipflops through rain showers atop slippery moss-covered sidewalks.

Soaked, I squeezed myself underneath the blue tarp held up by a few bamboo rods and twine, which was the roof of this makeshift street vendor selling betel nuts, individual packets of instant Nestle coffee, and Shark energy drinks. Two young men with betel nut lips and teeth (lips and decaying teeth dyed red from the betel nut chewing habit) casually looked up at me and asked "Korean?" Once I nodded yes, they smiled widely and enthusiastically gestured for me to sit down on a child-sized plastic chair and welcomed me to wait out the rain underneath the blue tarp. They smiled at me, making me feel welcomed, and they went back to watching YouTube videos on their Huawei smartphones.

As I watched the rain pour down on Merchant Street from underneath a betel nut vendor's tarp cover, I wondered why these two men did not take the opportunity to try to sell this foreigner something. After ten minutes, I realized these men truly were not opportunists, so I looked to see if I could purchase something. I opened and peeked inside their Styrofoam "icebox" with no ice in it and saw a small dead cockroach, a few grimy water bottles that were clearly re-used, and a Shark energy drink. I purchased the energy drink and sipped on the sugary drink through the straw I was offered, as these two young Burmese men and I silently waited out the rain.

Episode Three: A Perplexing Act of an Honest Shopkeeper Reminds me to Consider my Researcher Positionality in the Field

I was warned by everyone—from veteran researchers of Burma, Burmese friends, and local restaurant staff—to drink only bottled water in Burma. So, no matter how inconvenienced or overheated I was, I would always go to a teashop or store to purchase bottled water. A 16-ounce bottle of water was about 200 kyat (about $0.13), so I would usually buy two bottles, some gum, and some candies to add up to a 1,000 kyat bill ($0.66). One afternoon, I went into a family-owned shop and bought my usual necessities and walked out into the rain with my umbrella. When I was about a block away, I heard a child's voice, yelling "Ma! Ma!" (which means "sister" in Burmese). I did not think anything of it until a stranger tapped me on the shoulder and pointed to a child running after me. He was about six or seven years old, drenched from the rain, wearing shorts and no shirt. I had just seen him in the store, playing with a red toy car while his mother tended to customers.

Now, he was standing before me, wiping the rain away from his young face that was causing his thick black eyelashes to stick together, and opened his hand to reveal a scrunched-up, wet 100-kyat bill ($0.06). I looked past him and saw his mother standing outside her store, overseeing

this interaction. It was clear that she had sent her young son through the rain to give back the change that was owed to a customer. While 100 kyat is a non-negligible amount of money for some local residents, the store owner must have known that six U.S. cents was a trivial amount to a foreigner, which, for a self-interested store owner, would have been easy to keep without any reputational risk.

Yangon taxi drivers were known for calling higher prices for foreigners; beggars targeted foreigners for cash; children followed foreigners for several blocks to sell postcards and handmade drawings; and tickets for venues, boat rides, and events often cost multiple times higher for foreigners than for those of local residents. The phenomenon of asking foreigners for higher prices in a developing country was not at all unique to Burma.

Therefore, I reflected on this shopkeeper's act of selflessness the whole day. I asked a few Burmese friends, and they debated about to what prompted this shopkeeper's act of honesty. Was she just an unusually moral person? Was it due to the general desire among Burmese people to attract Westerners to keep visiting so they don't return to another era of a closed military dictatorship? Maybe she recognized that I was a researcher from Oxford, given that I walked up and down the street her shop was on multiple times a day while wearing an Oxford T-shirt at times? Was I simply overcomplicating a simple act of an honest person? Her kindness perplexes me and my friends in Yangon to this day.

Episode Four: My American Identifier Frames a Positive Interaction with a Young Stranger

I walked past a series of book vendors on Bogyoke Road and stopped at one to browse through an English-Burmese dictionary. I had just landed in Yangon the night before and hadn't re-acclimated to the intensely hot and humid weather at the height of monsoon season. My face was drenched, sweat dripping onto the small dictionary I held. Everyone else who was shuffling through the sidewalks, including women wearing longyis and tight matching tops with their long straight hair down their backs, didn't seem to mind the heat.

A young girl (no older than ten or eleven years old), who was helping her mother run this tiny bookstand stepped out from inside the booth and handed me a small packet of tissues in pink packaging, using both hands. Using both hands to give or receive an object is a sign of respect and grace in many cultures, including Burmese and Korean culture. I smiled and said no, I don't need it. She gently insisted, saying "Present. Present. Very hot here for Americans." I figured she guessed that I was an American because I was wearing a T-shirt and running shorts that both had "USA" on it (I wasn't trying to advertise that I was an American, but rather, the two clothing items were made of moisture-wicking fabric that made the heat somewhat bearable for me.) This young girl was gifting me a small packet of tissues. I thought, maybe she wants me to buy the tissues. Maybe she wants me to buy a few books in return for this seemingly kind gesture? Either way, I was happy to purchase the dictionary that had my perspiration on it, so I offered to buy the book. The girl shook her head, and said, "No, it's a present. No need to buy anything. I like Americans. I want to study in America one day." I was astonished. I insisted and purchased that dictionary.

Episode Five: My Korean-American Identifiers Are Salient in a Rural Town and Draw Kindness from a Young Teenager

Pakokku was a significantly more rural, less developed town than Yangon. Compared to Pakokku, Yangon seemed like Burma's Manhattan, with the standstill traffic, high rises, and throngs of people buying and selling goods throughout the city. As the sun slowly set, Pakokku became dusty, quiet, and dark. While finding it eerie at first to sit in my hotel room with my single fluorescent light bulb flickering on and off, listening to a singing lizard somewhere inside my hotel room, I quickly got used to it.

The first night my interpreter and I arrived in Pakokku, we walked around the small town to orient ourselves and find cafes where we could have our daily debriefs. Seeing that the lights around the downtown area were shutting off, we thought

it would be best to head back to the area where our hotel was, which was about four kilometers from where we were roaming around. We had difficulty finding paved roads in near darkness, so we approached one betel nut vendor after another, asking where we could find a taxi. Every vendor apologetically shook her head and said she didn't know, and then asked my interpreter where I was from, and what brought a foreigner to Pakokku. He told every vendor I was Korean-American and was in Pakokku as a tourist. Then it became completely dark, and most signs of human activity had disappeared off the streets except for men of all ages drinking at beer stations.

A male teenager wearing white headphones and a jean jacket pulled up in his motorbike next to me and my interpreter and asked where we were going. I told my interpreter not to tell him because how could we trust him? The young man—probably fifteen or sixteen years old—said he had overheard our conversation with a vendor about needing to get back to our hotel. He said he would take us. My intuition silently screamed, "No way!" in my head and gut. All day, people stared not only at me, who was clearly a foreigner, but also at my interpreter, who looked like he was from the big city. I thought we would definitely be taken advantage of in some way.

My interpreter said he trusted this young guy, and that we should hop on his small motorbike. Various scenes from the "Taken" trilogy movies starring Liam Neeson vividly flashed through my mind. But my interpreter, who I had spent nearly every day with for the previous three months, had good judgment. Trusting him, both of us squeezed onto the stranger's small motorbike. The young man and my interpreter shouted questions at each other over the sound of the engine and wind as we biked through the cool evening. Where was my interpreter from? What was a foreigner doing in Pakokku? What did my interpreter recommend to the biker on opportunities leading him to the big city (Yangon or Mandalay)? What could the biker do to learn English?

When we arrived at the restaurant near our hotel, we both hopped off as I breathed a sigh of relief. How much did he want for driving us? I asked. When my interpreter asked the young man, he vehemently shook his head, scrunched up his face and refused to take money. "We're brothers," he said in Burmese. My interpreter then told me that the young man said he was grateful to have met his first Korean and first American in his life. "Two in one!" he told my interpreter in Burmese. I realized the young man knew I was Korean-American without having asked us this, nor us having offered that information to him. I insisted that we pay him, and my interpreter stuffed 2,000 kyat ($1.33) into the man's jean jacket breast pocket and said, "buy your family a meal." The two men bowed to each other, shared blessings, and the young man drove off. We did not see him again during our stay in Pakokku.

If I did not know that the two men were strangers, I would have thought they were cousins, or at least good friends. The familiarity with which they treated each other was unfamiliar to me as a well-traveled American. And the absence of any desire to exploit a foreigner in a situation ripe for opportunism seemed too counterintuitive to me.

Conclusion

Observations gained from these anecdotes—and so many others that I do not have space to describe—are not meant to stereotype Burmese people in a romanticized, naively altruistic manner. I recognize that I may have been the recipient of favorable treatment because I was a foreigner in a formerly isolated country that recently opened up after four decades of a brutal military dictatorship. I also happened to have three characteristics that were favorably viewed by many of the people I came across, hence eliciting more trust, warmth, and favorable treatment as a qualitative researcher who heavily depends on interviews.

It was within these contextualized environments that I conducted my interviews. People usually invited me to their homes to do the interviews, but sometimes, I conducted my interviews in people's offices, shops, bookstores, and teashops. Tea and snacks were always involved. Most of the men either smoked cigarettes or cheroots throughout the interview. Some men chewed betel nut and spit out the inedible parts, along with their bright red expectorate, into small cups or plastic bags designated for this sole purpose.

While I had to fight the discomfort of speaking with betel nut-chewing interviewees at first, I quickly came to realize that it was I who had asked for the interviewees to open up to a foreign stranger, and answer questions about some of their most sensitive and dangerous experiences of their lives. It was I, a foreign stranger, who walked into my interviewees' homes, poking and prodding for their stories while offering nothing in return. The least I could do was to not disrupt their daily routine as they told me their stories about risk, heartbreak, repression, and death.

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