

# Fieldwork, Feelings and Failure to Be a (Proper) Security Researcher

Written by Jan Daniel

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JAN DANIEL, APR 19 2020

**This is an excerpt from *Fieldwork as Failure: Living and Knowing in the Field of International Relations*.  
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It is ten minutes past eight in the morning and I have finally arrived at a military base at the outskirts of Vicenza – the place where I am supposed to meet and interview Major Pierpaolo, a high-ranking officer in a research department of an international military training institute. I am late, it is raining, and I made a bad decision to walk through the town, instead of taking a bus, so I am wet and sweating. When my interlocutor, a cleanly shaven, large man dressed in a fitted dark blue uniform of Italian *carabinieri*, arrives to pick me up at the main gate, I can immediately sense that he was expecting a different person. Perhaps more senior, perhaps dressed in something else than jeans and a coloured shirt, or perhaps even someone with a military background. In the end, I am supposed to be a representative of a governmental research institute (or so says my affiliation) and I am doing research on serious military issues. As he walks me from the gate to his office and I unsuccessfully try to start a conversation, I start to think that perhaps I am not the right person for this research. This is not what I expected fieldwork to be like.

He gives me a tour of the facility and grudgingly answers some of my questions related to my research project, while indicating that he has better things to do than talk with a young, nervous, and visibly non-military guest. A fleeting sense of shared understanding among us is established only as we watch a group of non-European peacekeepers trying to perform a mock raid of a locked building and grotesquely failing to uphold a proper formation and ram through the doors. He rolls his eyes, gives me a slightly apologetic look and mutters that learning is a process. However, he quickly regains his detached and disinterested way of interacting with a young civilian dressed in overtly casual clothing and with a visibly non-military posture. As he walks me through the training grounds back to his office, I start to think that even though I got some interesting ‘data’ for my research project, this encounter feels like a failure.

I now know these moments and feelings that come with them quite well. The atmosphere during the interview and throughout the whole day was very formal and cold at best. The sense of closeness and mutual interest that sometimes appears during such research encounters was not there. I felt that I was not a conversation partner but rather an unwelcomed nuisance, a young civilian without military experience or a clue about ‘real’ military life. I have experienced similar situations before and I also know it is not something unusual. Many research encounters are deeply unsatisfactory for both sides and these failures happen for a myriad of different reasons. Still, the feelings which emerge during these moments are everything but pleasant. Among the dominant ones are an overwhelming sense of despair about potentially ruining a research project, anger that I am unable to establish a proper working relationship with my interlocutor, and self-doubt stemming from the question of whether I am able to conduct any field research at all.

### Feelings of Failure

Following the editors’ call to reflect on the notions of fieldwork and failure, I inquire into my personal feeling of failure during fieldwork and conditions that contributed to it. Countless fieldwork manuals for junior researchers explicitly state that the research conducted with ‘real people in real places’ is a stressful and unpredictable endeavour and it

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takes an emotional toll on the researcher. Many also mention the importance of 'impression management' needed to 'fit' the researcher with the studied group and bring him or her closer to the researched individuals to gain their trust, recognition and maintain access (e.g. Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, 66–71). These issues get even more pronounced in the cases of 'studying up' and research done on powerful actors and/or security professionals, where access is difficult and lack of trust towards researchers implicit (Baker et al. 2016; Ben-Ari and Levy 2014; Gusterson 1997; Kuus 2013). As interview opportunities are granted only rarely and the refusal of access can lead to the failure of a whole research project (see e.g. Kurowska, 2019), the perceived costs of potential failure and resulting pressure on getting the interview right could be felt as quite high.

This text presents an attempt to reflect on personal feelings of failure to conduct field research in the settings dominated by men of power – primarily military personnel and governmental security bureaucrats. I approach the notion of failure through a set of feelings – inner emotional states translated (and translatable) into words (Hutchison and Bleiker 2014, 501) – that were produced by my failed and failing research encounters. I am fully aware of an inevitable distortion of my memories related to the described events and emotions which accompanied them (as some moments have been unintentionally blended with others in the narrative reconstruction). Nevertheless, I am also convinced that these emotions, affects, and feelings should be productively interrogated to uncover the wider structural conditions which formed both the researcher and the idea of fieldwork – or in other words, the baggage that we bring with us to the particular moment of the research encounter (Åhäll 2018, 40; Davies and Spencer 2010, 23).

In the following paragraphs, I briefly trace some origins of this baggage as well as particular contexts of my feelings of failure experienced during fieldwork. I believe that some of my experiences might resonate with those of other researchers and stimulate their own reflections, however this exercise is also a personal attempt to think through some of the moments which I remember for their impact on my future research strategies or for their intensity. Some of them are related to my feeling of inability to establish a productive rapport with my interlocutors and resulting feelings related to personal inadequacy; others emerged from the messy nature of a fieldwork process, the sense of failing at it and my reactions to these failures. These feelings are by far not as traumatic (or dramatic) as those experienced by researchers working in violent environments (e.g. Al-Masri 2017; Monaghan 2006; Nordstrom and Robben 1995; Woon 2013). In fact, compared to them, they are admittedly quite banal. Nevertheless, they point to the embodied nature of field research, where the researcher faces his or her 'inescapable corporeality and emotional vicissitudes' (Monaghan 2006, 226; see also Coffey 1999; Vanderbeck 2005), corporeality and emotions that inevitably influence mutual positioning of both researcher and his or her interviewees during their encounters.

Approaching these topics through the instances of my feelings of personal failure, I focus in particular on three main issues – the importance of already existing expectations as a benchmark against which failure is assessed, the intimate nature of fieldwork as an activity that inserts a researcher into particular relationships with his or her informants, and finally, the transformation of particular feelings in time.

## Fieldwork as an Adventure

Only later I realised how much the feelings of failure I experienced during certain periods of my research were influenced by my undergraduate studies. I was trained in a security studies section of a political science department where fieldwork and related direct exposure to the studied issues were highly valued. According to stories circulated within classrooms, my (predominantly male) instructors rubbed shoulders with private military contractors, members of Shia militias, or Chechen rebel fighters – and they frequently spoke about their experiences in the associated risky research terrains. A particularly popular story shared in the methodology class on qualitative research involved one of the assistant professors and his participant observation among local right-wing skinheads; the story included his experience of drinking beer and singing while narrowly avoiding a bar fight. Another recounted a meeting with members of Yemeni tribes that ended in a shooting competition and an invitation to practice firing an RPG.

I did not look up to my professors, but through their lectures and stories and the literature I was assigned to read, I developed an idea of fieldwork, particularly in a wider area of security studies, as a dangerous adventure which was rewarded by first-hand access to the researched groups and a certain camaraderie with their members. Needless to say, potential failure was never mentioned and if it was, it was only for a comical effect. Similarly, any potentially

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discomforting emotions, such as fear or anxiety, were left out of a story or mentioned merely as a passing temporary distraction that can complicate the pursuit of research. The figure of a researcher conducting fieldwork in such narratives corresponded to a masculine hero who bravely and rationally faces the difficulties he encounters and returns from the field with first-hand knowledge of studied issues (for further reflection on reproduction of hegemonic masculine values and fieldwork see Vanderbeck 2005).

In sum, the fieldwork, as I was taught to imagine it in my methodological classes and through stories told by my instructors, was not without its difficulties and potential failures. However, these were primarily of a physical nature that came with 'dangerous' settings where the research was taking place. On the other hand, fieldwork was not supposed to be emotionally demanding. It rather corresponded to the stories of adventure and exciting encounters with people and places about which I, at that time, only read in books and heard in the media.

## Failures and Encounters

My first fieldwork, conducted during the second year of my Ph.D. studies, felt very different. A director and a deputy director of one of the smaller Czech security agencies, who were sitting behind a large wooden table in an office in the centre of Prague, started our discussion by reversing the roles of the interviewer(s) and interviewee(s) and examining the depth of my knowledge of the studied issue (on similar experience see also Kapiszewski et al. 2015, 86). When I somehow mumbled more or less satisfactory answers, they continued the interview by voicing their disdain for political science and its lack of any useful insights as well as for political scientists researching subjects they do not have any practical experience with. The shivering, nervous, and perplexed sound of my voice on the interview recording manifested that this was among the more stressful encounters that I experienced, and it left a strong mark in my memory. 'Looking forward to seeing you next time, dear student', they said as I was preparing to leave, articulating clearly the relationship between us and leaving me relieved, but also embarrassed and slightly angry about being so decisively put in my (supposed) place. In retrospect, the interview was not a complete failure as the officers started to engage with my questions after the initial clarification of hierarchies and they later continued to cooperate with me and my colleague on other projects, but looking back, it was indicative of future feelings of failure.

A couple of months later I embarked on my first 'proper' fieldwork. My project concentrated on local practices of UN peacekeeping in southern Lebanon and relations between peacekeepers, local civilian communities, and political actors. It did not go as expected. The interesting (and dangerous) people I wanted to interview did not want to speak with me as they were not authorised or interested to speak with a foreign researcher. The access to the main site was complicated by endless and tiresome bureaucratic procedures – it once caused me to be returned from a checkpoint leading to my studied area and missing an important interview that took me nearly a month to arrange. Moreover, the data which I gleaned from other sources did not conform with the concepts and theories which my Ph.D. project was based on. The dominant feeling at that time was not one of excitement but rather one of frustration with and anxiety over where my research was heading.

The sense of overall failure was only strengthened during a consultation with a prominent US journalist based in the country, a large bearded man in his fifties. He covered security issues in the region I studied for several US newspapers and magazines, and his articles at that time formed a significant part of my thinking about my research. He also brushed off most of my inputs into the conversation. My questions about inner workings of the local security field were met with a shrug and my ideas about potential gatekeepers who can help me to gain access to the studied area were dismissed without a feasible alternative. I felt intense embarrassment and even humiliation stemming from his reactions and general lack of interest. His concluding words 'OK, time for another one. Yeah, and thank you for the tea', which he uttered as he moved to another table with a waiting young guy and leaving me the bill to pay (a small detail which made me particularly upset at that moment), just added to the overall feeling of frustration and rejection. I felt that I not only failed to gain any meaningful insight into the studied issues, but also that I was failing in doing fieldwork as I imagined it – I could not establish collegial or even friendly relations with my interlocutors.

Yet, the feelings of failure can also change, sometimes quite abruptly. In fact, two encounters which followed the most intensely felt failures were also among the most satisfactory ones out of those I conducted during the initial stages of my doctoral research. One of them took place when my shared taxi took a detour and then got lost on a

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rainy evening in the eastern hilly outskirts of Beirut, where I was supposed to meet a high-ranking UN officer in a compound of one of the many UN agencies. I arrived at the meeting place more than an hour late, at the time when my interview was supposed to finish. However, my visible despair over not being able to carry-on my research in a professional manner changed my initially reserved and irritated interlocutor into a more open and welcoming person. In the end, the welcoming reaction of my interlocutor to my initial failure helped to produce a particularly insightful informal conversation on the state of the country, its infrastructure, and the role of the UN. What felt like a horrible failure caused by my lack of planning was in a few minutes transformed into a pleasant experience of meeting a welcoming and helpful person who was, given his own 'baggage', able to relate to the everyday difficulties of carrying out fieldwork.

A similar shift in my personal feeling of failure happened some time later, when after two months of waiting I was finally granted a permission to interview peacekeepers at the Lebanese-Israeli border. Experiencing a difficult personal period that added to my overall state of desperation with my fieldwork, I lost my voice due to a sore throat and staying out late on a cold night. Barely recovered, I travelled to the border region to meet my interviewees, only to lose my voice again in the morning before the interviews even started. Until now, it is difficult for me to think of a better example of a particularly deep feeling of complete failure. The question of how I could be so stupid and lose my voice, the only thing that I, in the end, need to perform my interviews, kept popping up in my head when I struggled to produce basic sounds resembling some words and introduce myself to an Indian peacekeeper, a young commander of a military-community outreach unit, and his deputy. Seeing my condition, my interlocutors reacted by taking me to a canteen in their compound and provided me with herbal tea and some medicine. I slowly regained my voice and, while I kept losing it throughout the whole day, we managed to talk. As the deputy-commander walked me out of the base in the afternoon, he asked me an unexpected question about my age. 'Good, we are the same age. We can be friends', he responded when hearing my answer. As with the previous encounter, the sense of desperation, my failure to behave as a 'normal' researcher, the strangeness of the situation for both sides, and the willingness of my interlocutors to react to it in an open and caring way transformed the atmosphere of the meeting. My emotional reaction to it as well as our relation had enabled us to establish a different, potentially more productive, form of rapport – in the case of the Indian peacekeeper, a rapport which even developed into a certain kind of friendship maintained through periodic updates on a messaging app.

Nevertheless, fieldwork encounters are unpredictable and not all failures turn into something more pleasant. And even if one manages to gradually enact some distance between themselves and the mishaps in the field, they still have an impact. A few years after the story recounted in the introduction, I found myself sitting behind a heavy wooden table in an office decorated with old rifles and memorial plaques from NATO training exercises. 'Do you even know what the peacekeeping operations are?', a high-ranking official at the Czech Ministry of Defence asked me. 'Do you know who General Dallaire was? Do you know what happened in Rwanda?' Of course, I did. However, that was not enough for him. 'So why are *you two* writing a report on the Czech involvement in the UN peacekeeping operations? What do you even know about the Army logistics and training practices?' At this point, it became obvious that my research partner and I were not the people he expected when he (or rather his assistant) warmly answered our email asking for an interview. Perhaps he expected someone more senior, or perhaps even someone from the military and with military experience. After further queries from him, which took up all the time for the interview, we were told that our time was up, and that we could send further questions by email. We shared a feeling of despair for not managing to productively conduct an important interview, anger for not even being given a chance to try to do so, and anxiety over the future of the project. Though it would be uplifting to conclude the paper with a story of turning a failure into a sort of success, my experience of doing research among diplomats, security bureaucrats, military officials and other 'men of power' produced probably more stories of failure like this and the one which opened the paper (see also Baker et al. 2016) than stories about the unexpected turning of failure into success.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I briefly return to the three aspects of fieldwork failure and the connected feelings. To say that failure does not make sense without certain expectations and connected normative standards is to state something obvious. Many of my initial feelings of failure during my own fieldwork stemmed from unrealistic expectations about

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adventurous, controlled and masculine fieldwork that I developed in my early studies. Fieldwork, as I came to know it during my Ph.D. studies is, however, not like that. Fieldwork is, or could be, among many other things, messy, and deeply frustrating and failure is unavoidable. Many stories of failure described above stem from various accidents and contingencies that make fieldwork often a very unpredictable experience over which a researcher has only limited control. This is not to say that planning fieldwork is impossible, irrelevant, or that better planning would not limit the impact of certain failures. This simple advice is emphasised by many fieldwork manuals (e.g. Kapiszewski et al. 2015). However, knowing before embarking on my first longer bout of fieldwork that the moments of failure and the feelings they produce are shared by many researchers might have made certain moments a bit more bearable.

I also tried to show through the text that my feelings of failure have often emerged from unsatisfactory relations with my interlocutors and my (perceived) failing to fit with their expectations of what a proper security researcher looks and behaves like. In a way this also speaks to the contingency of fieldwork as some such failures can destabilise the roles of a researcher and an informant and produce a different, potentially even closer, form of rapport, while others lead to outright rejection. However, beyond contingency, the feelings that I engaged with in this paper are also inseparable from the very nature of the research encounter as a meeting of two (or more) people with their own 'baggage' of previous experiences, expectations, and emotional investments in the given situation.

These feelings stem from a specific understanding of relations between the researcher and the researched and the unrealistic expectation of a certain closeness between the two.<sup>[1]</sup> In other words, our interlocutors are not (automatically) our friends and we should not expect them to be, as our roles in this type of encounter are different. There is an instrumental interest on both sides: I want to learn certain information and my interlocutors want to tell certain stories and/or are curious about the experience of being interviewed. Taking this into account might help to separate oneself from some unpleasant moments which happen during fieldwork and limit the potential emotional damage – something which I have been thinking about since the experiences discussed here, and which I have yet to learn how to fully apply in practice.

Finally, failure, if approached through the feelings, emotions, and affects connected to it, has its specific afterlife. There are many contradictory feelings which I have experienced during my interviews and fieldwork for different projects. In retrospect, many of the failures recounted above and the feelings associated with them could serve as interesting data. I can use them to grasp a certain form of relationship and identity-performance which would contextualise the given situation and help me understand more about the social and organisational settings in which my interlocutors are embedded. In fact, this whole text is a result of such reflection. However, the comfort of a detached position is not present during moments when failure to establish a productive and mutually respectful relation is felt. As much as I deeply enjoy doing fieldwork, these moments often make me feel like I am a failure.

## Notes

[1] I would like to thank a discussant of an early version of this paper for pointing this out.

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