

PERSPECTIVES ON FIELD RESEARCH IN SECURITY-SENSITIVE SPACES –
INSIGHTS FROM CHINA AND THE SOUTHERN MEDITERRANEAN AREA

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ABI Working Paper No. 14

Freiburg, Germany

May 2020



ABI Working Paper No. 14

Edited by the Arnold Bergstraesser Institute

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**PERSPECTIVES ON FIELD RESEARCH IN SECURITY-SENSITIVE SPACES –
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Abstract: Early career researchers doing fieldwork in spaces that are security-sensitive, either with regards to the political situation, the research topic or the research surrounding, face many challenges during fieldwork. Questions of ethics, power and representation, but also different aspects of safety and possible limitations must be carefully considered if researchers are conducting fieldwork in security-sensitive environments. The article engages with the main challenges and coping strategies for two case studies – research in China and the Southern Mediterranean Area – and is based on interviews and notes from participatory observation collected and experiences made during extensive fieldwork in the respective regions. We critically engage with different forms of security-sensitivity that are 1) politically security-sensitive spaces, 2) topic-related security-sensitive spaces, and 3) insecure spaces of research. The paper lists implications of field research in security-sensitive settings for the research process, provides insight into lessons learnt and best practices and gives general recommendations for early career field research in Political Science.

Keywords: Fieldwork, Security, Best Practice, China, Mediterranean

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1. Introduction

Researchers doing fieldwork in security-sensitive settings face many challenges during their time in the field.¹ Questions of ethics, power and representation, but also different aspects of safety must be carefully considered when conducting fieldwork in security-sensitive environments. Although there is a plethora of academic approaches to guidelines for field research in Political Science (Moss *et al.* 2019; Glasius *et al.* 2018; Mackenzie *et al.* 2007; Sylvester 2011; Morgenbesser and Weiss 2018; Wood 2006; Krause 2017; Höglund and Öberg 2011), literature explicitly assessing challenges and coping strategies for early career researchers and their fieldwork in security-sensitive settings has hitherto remained scarce.² Thus, more in-depth accounts are needed to fill this gap and provide researchers working in the field for the first time with useful recommendations.

With the growing methodological diversity in International Politics and the corresponding rise of critical and explorative research approaches, the demand for best practices for fieldwork is constantly growing. Additionally, as researchers are becoming more aware of the complexities of insecurity and conflicts (entailing a broader analysis of other phenomenon accompanied by a more globalized world or rise of (military) technologies) in many world regions, the scope of security broadens and deepens. This poses additional challenges for research and presents new research puzzles. Political science researchers have to reflect upon these changes to engage with timely topics such as the so-called refugee crisis, state failure, contested sovereignty or the rise and stability of authoritarian regimes like China in an adequate manner. Furthermore, guidelines and best practices, as well as accounts of personal experiences and coping strategies for early career researchers preparing and conducting their own fieldwork are scarce. This article addresses the question of how security-sensitivity manifests in the process of field research and how early career researchers in the Political Science can tackle challenges that emanate from security-sensitive settings.

In the academic discourses, terms such as (in)security or sensitivity are often used in a self-explanatory manner and are not sufficiently defined. This is also the case with the term security-

¹ We would like to specifically thank Dr. Franzisca Zanker and Prof. Dr. Jürgen Rüländ, as well as family and friends for their continuing support and guidance during our fieldwork.

Also, we would like to thank Dr. Franzisca Zanker, Prof. Dr. Andreas Mehler and Harry Parfitt, as well as the participants of the DVPW IR section workshop on “Ethik und empirische Methoden: Aktuelle Herausforderungen der Datenerhebung und -analyse in den IB” for their constructive feedback on earlier versions of this article.

² One exception that should be mentioned here is the article by Irgil *et al.* (2020) “Field Research: A Graduate Student's Guide”.

sensitivity, which is difficult to conceptualize. A good starting point is the definition given by Sieber and Stanley (1988). They consider sensitive research as research that could possibly endanger either the researcher or the people involved in the research process, including interview partners or local contact persons (Sieber and Stanley 1988). Renzetti and Lee (1993) suggest another concept of security-sensitivity. They include issues that are intimate, discrediting or incriminating (Renzetti and Lee 1993). As examples sexual abuse, political or physical violence, oppression and authoritarianism, forced migration and expulsion are mentioned. Accordingly, it can be concluded that security-sensitivity is either linked 1) to the researcher, 2) to the research context or 3) to the people involved in the research process. The researcher dimension includes numerous aspects such as ethical responsibility (Mackenzie *et al.* 2007; Glasius *et al.* 2018), personal security (Moss *et al.* 2019; Morgenbesser and Weiss 2018) and mental integrity (Stoler 2002; Sylvester 2011) of the researcher. The dimension relating to the research context includes issues such as access to the field or data security (Anderson and Hatton 2000; Sriram 2009; Koch 2013) as well as challenges that emanate from difficult research environments such as authoritarian or insecure settings. Those researchers who also work together with local contact persons, informants or interview partners must also consider their security and well-being (Wood 2006; Krause 2017), which constitutes the third dimension.

The article offers an in-depth analysis of the main challenges and coping strategies for two case studies: research in China and the Southern Mediterranean Area³. The analytical framework of this article entails three sections and distinguishes between different contexts of security-sensitivity. These are 1) politically security-sensitive spaces, 2) topic-related security-sensitive spaces, and 3) insecure spaces of research. For each stage, we carefully engage with the respective regional foci and link it back to the research projects that were conducted. We discuss the main concerns of (in-)security that influenced the research process. The analysis is based on information collected and experiences made during extensive fieldwork in the respective regions. The article concludes with lessons learnt and discusses the implications of the findings for future field research. Moreover, it provides general recommendations for early career researchers conducting fieldwork in security-sensitive settings.

³ In this article, the Southern Mediterranean Area includes Italy, Malta and the Mediterranean Sea (more specifically, the part of the Central Mediterranean Route crossing the Mediterranean Sea).

2. Three dimensions of security-sensitivity– challenges and coping strategies

What are the main methodological challenges when doing fieldwork⁴? And how do these challenges manifest in different security-sensitive spaces? In general, the question of advantages or risks of using interviews for political analyses has been widely discussed among Political Science scholars and qualitative methods researchers (Gläser and Laudel 2010; Tansey 2007; Leech 2002). Interviews can be a means of reconstructing complex processes (Gläser and Laudel 2010). For research on foreign policy and decision-making processes, as well as in (critical) IR research and migration research, elite and expert interviews are established methodological tools to generate unique reliable and valid data (Beamer 2002). While elite interviews target people who are directly involved in the political processes of a country or do policy consultancy (Dexter 2006; Natow 2019), expert interviews focus on other (academic or non-academic) researchers or people with specific expert knowledge, who touch upon similar research topics (Tansey 2007). Furthermore, interviews are a suitable tool to go beyond official statements and shed light on underlying causal processes. Participatory observation is a methodological approach oftentimes used in security-sensitive environments. Nevertheless, it poses certain methodological challenges. Oftentimes, participatory approaches are criticised because of their lack of objectivity and production of subjective and situated knowledge. Also, ethical concerns connected to the potential disclosure of the researcher's true identity and the potential negative impact the researcher presence might cause are frequently put forward (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011). Still, using participatory observation when doing research with vulnerable populations is a commonly used tool in critical and feminist IR (Aldridge 2016). Advantages are little intervention and irritation with the research populations, as well as a unique insight into the processes and environments connected to a certain phenomenon, such as hidden power imbalances or forms of structural or symbolic forms of violence, that can only be observed when participating (Campbell and Wasco 2000). However, existing scholarly literature can benefit from a more specific elaboration on the different contexts of security-sensitivity and the respective challenges and coping strategies for early career researchers.

Accordingly, the following section assesses the specific challenges we faced when conducting fieldwork in security-sensitive settings. Three different types of security-sensitivity are addressed. The first case assesses questions of accessibility, confidentiality and data protection when conducting interviews in the authoritarian China. The second case deals with interview

⁴ The specific methods that were applied during fieldwork for these two case studies were elite and expert interviews, interviews with refugees as well as participatory observation.

conduction and participatory observation in the Southern Mediterranean Area and touches upon trauma-sensitivity and ethical responsibility. While the first case is security-sensitive because of the political situation and the research topic within this surrounding, security-sensitivity in the latter derives from the researched topic as well as from insecure spaces within which the research was conducted. Moreover, we carefully reflect challenges to our own security as researchers.

2.1. Insights into fieldwork in security-sensitive environments: China and the Southern Mediterranean Area

Fieldwork in China was part of the PhD research project “Against all odds? EU-China security relations in the Middle East in the context of political tensions”, which focuses on the development of EU-China security cooperation in the broader Middle East. The project sheds light on three different security issues (climate/energy security, anti-terrorism and anti-piracy) and assesses the degree of cooperation, competition or conflict between the EU and China in the respective issues.

Fieldwork in the Southern Mediterranean region (Italy, Malta and on the Mediterranean Sea) was part of the PhD research project “Violence against Male Refugees – Patterns, Factors and Consequences for Individuals and Communities” which focuses on the experiences of insecurity and violence of male refugees and migrants on the move, and the consequences of this on the individual and community level.⁵

Both projects used expert interviews. The project on China also relies on elite interviews and qualitative text analysis, whilst the project on the Mediterranean also employs interviews with refugees and migrants, as well as participatory observation.

2.2 Politically security-sensitive spaces - The example of China

In politically security-sensitive spaces, three main obstacles can be identified. They are mostly linked to the research context and to a much lesser extent to the researcher. These challenges are 1) sampling, 2) accessibility to the shielded off political elites and (Manion 1994; Zhou and

⁵ The research is based on an understanding that women/girls and men/boys experiences during the move might be different, and as such would have distinct needs, coping methods, priorities and face different protection risks. Still, this doesn't neglect the fact that from a constructivist understanding sex doesn't equal gender. Therefore, some men act feminine and vice versa. To clarify again, the research project focuses on heterosexual cis-men.

Baptista Nunes 2013), 3) confidentiality/data security and trustworthiness and (Bahn 2012) 4) cultural specificities.⁶

One of the main challenges during the interview process in such settings is to find a balance between searching for access to the process itself and the risk of bad data quality, conducting interviews in a biased way and securing trustworthiness of the interviewees (Glasius *et al.* 2018). These challenges are especially high if the target group from which interviewees are recruited are political elites, and are even higher if they are part of the policy-making circle of an authoritarian system. Furthermore, there is the possible risk of latent selectivity in evidentiary sources (Bennett and Checkel 2014), as actors might have instrumental reasons to either convey a particular message or to avoid divulging certain pieces of information (Morgenbesser and Weiss 2018; Zhou and Baptista Nunes 2013). Yet, the assumption that “work on authoritarian regimes should obviously not be held to the same evidentiary standards as work on the advanced industrial democracies” (Art 2012) should not hold true. In contrast, these ethical and methodological challenges that surveillance and threats to data security in authoritarian research settings pose to the research process can be circumvented by concise planning and increased awareness (Gentile 2013; Koch 2013).

The choice of an adequate sampling strategy was especially important for the project with fieldwork in China. Asking the wrong questions in China can either restrict the access to further interviewees, lead to mistrust on behalf of the target group or create insecurity for the researcher. Moreover, interviews in authoritarian settings bear the risks of poor data quality either due to the unwillingness to reveal information or the intention to convey certain messages on behalf of the interviewee. Therefore, the main challenge when I prepared my fieldwork in China was to apply with regulations of discretion and political sensitivity while at the same time trying to extract information (Davies 2011; Tansey 2007; Beamer 2002; Berry 2002).

Regarding accessibility in China, I faced the challenge that within the cultural context of the PRC (People’s Republic of China), members of the political elite mostly act according to the rules and opinion of the Communist Party. Non-officials were comparably easy to access through interpersonal connections (Gold *et al.* 2002), but higher-level officials remained mostly out of reach. Moreover, I observed a certain degree of collectivism (Hofstede *et al.* 2010). Subordinates and in-groups seemed to depend on power figures for permission and were

⁶ Julia Gurol conducted the fieldwork in China. As her experiences inform this section, she will write in the first person.

therefore not willing to participate in interviews unless they were told so from their superiors. I tried to circumvent these challenges by reaching out to actors outside of the state and the party apparatus to gather information on policy information. These actors did not have the same insight into the political decision-making process as elites but yet were close enough to the political elites to provide inside information.

When sampling my interviewees, I proceeded in two steps: first, I selected *experts and political scientists* via purposive sampling. Second, I approached interviewees close to *political elites* of the PRC, such as policy advisors to the Chinese foreign ministry and government, based mostly in the CPC-led (Communists Party of China) think tanks in Beijing as well as diplomats and ambassadors, former and current. For this sample, I used snowball sampling to increase the number of possible participants and to amplify my sample (Berry 2002; Diekmann 2001). Against all odds, I tried to select those key political players who were closest to the processes of interest (Berry 2002; Tansey 2007). As the interviews addressed very (security-) sensitive issues, many interviewees were concerned about their own safety. In fact, the responsiveness of possible interviewees was higher when other interviewees in their network contacted and recruited them. This applied to informal policy networks as well as to policy advisers and political decision-makers. Although the risk of snowball sampling is to introduce a certain bias into the sample, which makes information less generalizable, snowball sampling worked well in shielded off samples, as in China, and helped me to circumvent accessibility problems.

Anonymity is a crucial aspect in conducting those interviews to ensure that the person him-or herself doesn't face negative consequences (threats, loss of face etc.). Data security and anonymity had most implications in the Chinese context. With regard to data security and ensuring the anonymity of research partners and interviewees in the Chinese context, I had to prove both my expertise and trustworthiness to gain access (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2009; Berger, 2015). Most of the interviews could not be recorded, because of explicitly voiced confidentiality concerns. Therefore, I took extensive notes during the interviews and transcribed each interview directly after the interview process. In addition, I could solve some accessibility problems by promising anonymity to the interviewees. Moreover, I had to rely on oral consent for the interviews in order to increase mutual trust and respect and could not use formal consent forms, as it would be the standard in other research settings. Moreover, I had the feeling that addressing people in Chinese before the interviews started and explaining them in their own language the objective of the interviews, greatly increased my trustworthiness. Besides gaining

the interviewee's trust, this also showed those my interview partners that I am knowledgeable to the Chinese context and culturally sensitive.

Therefore, I could well understand another obstacle that arose in the Chinese context. During the interviews, I observed a very interesting context specific social interaction pattern: the Chinese phenomenon of *mianzi* (面子). *Mianzi* relates to the Chinese concept of preserving face. It could be characterized as “the recognition by others of one's social standing and position” (Lockett 1988). I noticed *mianzi* when the interviewees responded in a way that might preserve their face instead of being fully honest (Zhou and Baptista Nunes 2013; Buckley *et al.* 2006; Cui 2015). Furthermore, I noticed that interviewees were not only inclined to save their own face, but also tried to save the *mianzi* of their colleagues and departments. Sometimes, they also differentiated clearly between the official line and their personal opinion, as in the following example. “I can offer two explanations. The official position of the government towards terrorism in the Middle East is neutral (...). I, as a scholar, have different views.” (Interview #17, 11-03.19). The phenomenon of *mianzi* became stronger, the higher the position of an interviewee was and the closer its institution was to the Communist Party. Often, the interviewees responded in a way that would emphasize their allegiance and loyalty to the Chinese regime. This reveals the high-power distance trait which characterizes Chinese culture.

2.3 Topic-related security-sensitive spaces – the example of the Southern Mediterranean Area

Carrying out fieldwork in security-sensitive topic-related spaces creates challenges in four different areas. Those areas are linked to the research context, researched population, as well as the researcher, and include during the preparation stage of the fieldwork 1) the choice of and access to research partners, and 2) trauma sensitive preparation and mutual respect. During the fieldwork itself 3) giving consent and power hierarchies in interview situations, and 4) the trustworthiness of the researcher were the main challenges.⁷

When shifting the focus towards migration and displacement some additional aspects come into play. Observations and recommendations in this field usually focus on one aspect of the fieldwork process, such as protection of interview partners (Sieber 2008) or power hierarchies in a research setting (Arcidiacono *et al.* 2017). Research ethics is probably the most discussed

⁷ Cita Wetterich conducted the fieldwork in the Southern Mediterranean Area. Hence, her experiences are informing this section and she will be writing in the first person.

aspect when engaging with interviews and fieldwork in migration and displacement studies. Ulrike Krause (2017) argues that ethical consideration should be understood as a code of conduct for researchers in the field, as well as a framework for normative reflections of academic work. Other researchers also highlight personal precautions for the researcher, concerning both personal security and mental health (Kronick *et al.* 2018). Additional works include Cohen & Arieli's (2011) argumentation for snowball sampling when working with vulnerable populations or Roll & Swenson (2019) who engage with the issue of access and data quality more broadly in a (post-) conflict setting. One aspect that is repeatedly discussed is the relationship between researcher and participants in connection to questions of ethics, power and representation (Schulz 2019). Still, an all-encompassing approach that engages with all aspects of the fieldwork process in security-sensitive settings is missing with the few exceptions (Krause 2017).

When trying to explore specific knowledge within the context of migration and displacement or the primary target audience is too vulnerable, expert interviews are frequently used (El-Mafaalani *et al.* 2016).⁸ Conducting interviews within the field of forced migration or displacement requires increased awareness that the actions of the researcher, as well as difficult context conditions, can produce or increase dangers for the interview partners. For research on migration and displacement, the sampling strategy of potential interview partners is of outmost importance. It is especially challenging to establish contact with potential interview partners. In the context of fieldwork in Southern Europe, interview partners were primarily experts on the local level. They both function as primary interview partners and as gatekeepers to migrant communities (Düvell *et al.* 2009). In some instances, language can be an issue, but also trust and specific ways of interaction that might differ in different countries or settings (Berger 2015). The sampling strategy for my expert interviews was a combination of identification of key actors in (Southern) Italy on migration from different realms (social, political, medical, psychological, non-governmental, governmental), as well as snowball-sampling (cf. Beamer, 2002).

Additionally, critical researchers oftentimes also conduct interviews with refugees and migrants in a peer-to-peer setting, addressing their interview partners as experts trying to minimize hierarchies within the interview situation. This is informed by the understanding to include

⁸ Additional methods to support or substitute interviews are ethnographic approaches, such as participatory observation (Musante *et al.* 2014), that have their own critical implications.

migrants and refugees not as objects but subjects in the research process (Choi *et al.* 2019; Triandafyllidou 2017).

For access to local experts in Italy, language and trustworthiness were the key challenges. As my language capacity in Italian is not sufficient to conduct qualitative in-depth interviews in Italian and many people have limited knowledge in English, I had to be more flexible about the interview language. In the end, this led to expert interviews conducted in English, German and French, with some Italian parts. Even though this poses some additional challenges when evaluating the collected data, it enhanced the number of interviews. The greater issue for respondents was with my trustworthiness. As the interviews were about very (security-) sensitive issues, many were concerned for their own safety, as well as for their network. Hence, I had to prove both my expertise and trustworthiness to gain access (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2009; Berger 2015). These factors influenced the purposive selection of interview partners and led me to rely more on snowball sampling.

The second challenge during the planning phase of fieldwork in a security-sensitive topic-related space is the context specific and (trauma) sensitive preparation. This aspect accompanied the whole preparation phase of the fieldwork in the Southern Mediterranean Area. When conducting interviews in a forced migration setting, a thorough preparation is needed, both to ensure validity of the collected data, to protect interview participants and researchers from harm and to reflect on and review the researcher's role during the fieldwork phase (Krause 2017; Anderson 1999). Research ethics and sensitivity in the interview guidelines play a crucial role when preparing interviews with potentially specifically vulnerable peoples.

Hence, I addressed all my interview partners as experts, both for the expert interviews and the interviews with refugees. Before the fieldwork, researchers that conduct interviews on a security-sensitive topic need to assess the psychological risk for the interview partners that might arise from the interview and the possibility of re-traumatization as a consequence (Pittaway *et al.* 2010; Krause 2017). For my semi-structured interviews, I chose a trauma-sensitive approach – the Resiland method (Wenke *et al.* 2015). This meant that, for one, an interview situation should always be based on honouring and building trust and respect in reciprocal ways (Lawrence *et al.* 2013). Also, I needed to respect peoples' limits and as a consequence chose to raise (security-)sensitive questions by addressing my interview partners as experts and formulating some questions in the third person (Wenke *et al.* 2015; Krause 2017), for example “As an expert for this route, could you identify situation or places during the

journey that are very insecure for people?”. To make sure that my interview guidelines would not cause (re-)traumatization and still would lead to reach information for the research project, I discussed them beforehand with a mental health practitioner working at the intersection of violence, torture and displacement with men and boys. In an additional step, an experienced senior researcher within the field of forced migration gave me feedback on the interview guidelines. Only after their approval, I began with the interview phase.

In the context of fieldwork in the Southern Mediterranean region, power hierarchies concerning class, race, culture and gender needed to be considered carefully (Harding, 1987; Anderson and Hatton, 2000). By respecting peoples’ human rights, agency and entitlements, researchers within the field of forced migration researchers can shift the focus from engaging with interviewees as research objects towards interview partners as subjects with their own expertise (Bell, 2008; Krause, 2017). When I conducted interviews with refugees as members of a specifically vulnerable population, it was important to respect my interview partners’ agency and expertise. It tried not only not to harm them or their close social network, but also to give them some sort of benefit. To ensure the complexities of giving consent and to give interview participants the possibility to enact agency (Mackenzie et al., 2007), it was crucial to let them take decisions autonomously and to let them decide how to tell their story. To create trust, I explained the research project, as well as my professional (and parts of my personal) background to my interview partners. Sometimes bridging the distance between research and interview partner and declaring sympathy does not compromise research standards but is necessary for the research process (Miller, 2004; Mackenzie et al., 2007). In an additional step, I asked my interview partners for written consent and explained again what their participation in the research project would mean, while also giving the option to sign with an alias. In a last step, I made sure that the participants were aware that 1) their participation would not influence their asylum procedure in any way and 2) that they could always withdraw consent by contacting the provided channels (via mail or social media – which is oftentimes the preferred mode of communication).

The last grand challenge during the execution of fieldwork in a security-sensitive topic related space, trustworthiness, had significant implications during the fieldwork in Italy. As a foreigner without a practitioner background, unknown in activist circles, getting access to local experts was often difficult. For a target population that faces a lot of outside pressure and at times criminalisation, the trustworthiness of the interviewer is an important factor in their decision-making process to agree or not to agree to an interview (Denscombe 2010). Especially for

people working for or volunteering with NGOs that conduct SAR (search and rescue) operations on the Mediterranean Sea, mistrust towards outsiders is growing. Interviewees frequently mentioned the prosecution of NGO SAR operations and the spying on crew members by the Italian and German state during the interviews (Interview 2B, Catania, March 2019). The more involved interviewees were with SAR operations, the more I had to prove my professionalism and knowledge on the topic of forced migration in the Mediterranean. Although, at times, this was challenging, it already provided insight into which aspects, issues and (power) relations are frequently problematized, such as the reaction by European states towards SAR NGOs and refugees, but also behaviour of (foreign) researchers towards interview partners⁹, within this context.

2.4 Insecure spaces of research – conducting fieldwork on the Mediterranean Sea

During fieldwork in insecure spaces of research, the main challenge is to ensure the personal security of interview partners and researcher.¹⁰

Researchers conducting fieldwork in dangerous environments need to be able to react quickly and appropriately in tricky or even dangerous situations (Tomei 2014; Sluka 2015). Planning such a research trip and diminishing the dangers that might occur can be mediated through foresight and skilful manoeuvre (Sluka 2012). Still, one can only prepare for situations and challenges that are some dangers cannot be diminished as they are unforeseeable. Also, personal insecurity has different reasons and implications depending on various factors, such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality or religion. Hence, if researchers experience (sexualised) violence, they should take the necessary individual steps for their personal well-being and their career. Experiencing violence during fieldwork and not being able to prevent it, is no indication of one's professionalism in planning and conducting fieldwork (Schneider 2020). The concerns connected to the personal security of the researcher and research participants were apparent during the fieldwork stage on the Mediterranean Sea. Even though participating as researcher in an NGO SAR operation in front of the Libyan coast increased my trustworthiness within the community, additional challenges emerged.

One big consideration was my personal security. Being associated with a group or actor – in my case with NGO SAR activists – can pose direct danger to personal security, as it might not be obvious to the opposite side that one participates for research purposes and not primarily as

⁹ For a deeper analysis of this issue see for example (Mackenzie *et al.* 2007).

¹⁰ Again, Cita Wetterich's experiences during her fieldwork inform this section.

an activist (Sluka 2012). Being as close as 12 sea miles to the Libyan coast and encountering military vessels from the so-called Libyan Coast Guard (LCG) or Libyan militias, posed a great challenge to me as a researcher and individual. An additional concern was that, by me participating in the mission as a researcher, further disadvantages or insecurities would emerge for the other crew members, as having researchers or journalists accompanying the mission could be seen as a provocation.

To collect information and nonetheless stay safe, I blended in with the crew of the NGO vessel, followed the instructions of the captain of the NGO vessel at all times and respected that I, as a woman, was not supposed to interact with the Libyan actors. In my opinion and in contrast to Sluka (2012), it was crucial that I was not only part of the mission as researcher but as also a crew member to increase trust and to be able to blend in when necessary. This might affect the objectivity of the information collected. Still, I argue that research can never and does not have to be objective but rather transparent (Brühl *et al.* 2018; Blatter *et al.* 2018) for a critique of objectivity as quality criterion for “good” research). Hence, I show in my research how the information was collected and what my role and position was during the data collection to make it clear to an outsider what possible complications and effects my behaviour and presence in the situation might produce.

2.5 We finished our fieldwork – so, all work is done?

After the completion of the fieldwork, it seems like everything that is left to do is to analyse the collected information and produce some sort of outcome. In contrast, we argue that one of the most crucial elements for the researcher only comes after the fieldwork itself. Especially for early career researchers, it is of utmost importance to reflect on and classify the experiences made. This is true regardless of whether the fieldwork was in a security-sensitive political space, a topic-related security-sensitive space or an insecure space. Hence, we engage together with the issue of de-briefing and shortly touch upon secondary traumatization, support within university hierarchies and peer support.

After fieldwork in security-sensitive settings, it is crucial for a researcher to de-brief with a colleague or supervisor after interviews and at the end of the fieldwork stage (Anderson and Hatton 2000; Cowles 1988), as well as having already engaged with the possibility of being affected by the material during the preparation stage (Bell *et al.* 2003). This was true for both research projects. Additionally, the issue of secondary traumatization of researchers and practitioners is frequently discussed in rather medical or psychological research (Coles *et al.*

2014; Stoler 2002). Researchers who engage with vulnerable population and security-sensitive issues, such as forced displacement and violence, are also prone to be affected by the information they collect at some stage of their research process (Coles and Mudaly 2010). Especially in the context of research in the Mediterranean, 12 sea miles from the Libyan coast, feelings of loneliness and excessive demands of the research situation and topic reoccurred regularly, which is not an uncommon phenomenon in feminist (IR) research (Sylvester 2011). Notes from the participatory observation on a SAR vessel after an encounter with the so-called Libyan Coast Guard repeatedly engage with these topics. Hence, de-briefing should be an important component of the evaluation stage of fieldwork.

This de-briefing can happen in several ways. Firstly, the authors engaged with the existing research and recommendations for ethical consideration when doing fieldwork in a conflict or highly security-sensitive setting (Wibben 2016) and fieldwork more broadly (Sriram 2009; Höglund and Öberg 2011). By engaging with the literature and taking into account experiences from other researchers, we were able to establish a personal supervision and de-briefing network that included peer researchers, as well as more experienced researchers on a post-doc or professorial stage that were familiar with both the constraints of security-sensitive fieldwork linked to the researcher and the research-context. Having someone, also on a peer level, to reflect with on experiences and traumatic information, as well as destigmatizing disturbances caused by the research, is of utmost importance to prevent secondary trauma (Bober and Regehr 2006). Additionally, being in frequent contact to researchers on the same level doing fieldwork at the same time helped to put own experiences into perspective. Still, what is missing is an institutionalized form of (professional) de-briefing and supervision by universities when doing fieldwork in general and on sensitive topics such as violence, torture and rape more specifically.

3. Conclusion and lessons learnt

In this paper, we elaborated on the considerations when carrying out research in a security-sensitive setting. Security-sensitive settings, as we understand it, can play out in three different spaces. First, politically security-sensitive spaces, like the authoritarian China, second, topic-related security-sensitive spaces, like the Southern Mediterranean Area and third, insecure spaces of research, like the mission on a SAR ship on the Mediterranean Sea. Moreover, challenges emanating from these security-sensitive spaces can affect either the researcher as such, the research context or the people involved in the research process, such as research

assistants, contact persons or interviewees. Our analysis has shown that the effects that concern the researcher include aspects such as ethical responsibility, personal security and mental well-being. Challenges emanating for the research context include issues such as accessibility to the field or data security, while implications for people involved in the research process encompass the security of the target population, contact persons and interview partners.

We carefully engaged with these spaces of security-sensitivity and dimensions of implications for the research process. We critically discussed the challenges and coping strategies that we, as early career researchers faced when conducting fieldwork in these settings. We hoped to spark discussions by engaging with existing literature and subsequently putting our own experiences into context.

Our comparison of the three different security-sensitive spaces has unveiled unique challenges and problems with regards to the researcher, the research context and the people involved in the research process. This also entails that – even though all aspects should be considered when preparing, conducting and evaluating fieldwork – some are of higher importance than others in the respective security-sensitive spaces. Taking into account these differences prevents from responding inadequately to challenges to the researcher, the research context or the people involved in the research process. In the following we will in details sum up the different obstacles connected to the different dimensions in the three different security-sensitive spaces. The distinction between high, medium and low importance is deducted from our own experiences but is also triangulated with existing literature.

Whilst obstacles connected to the researcher are the highest when conducting fieldwork in insecure spaces, the research context has to be considered the most in politically security-sensitive settings. Both for topic-related security sensitive spaces and insecure spaces of research, challenges connected to the people included in the research process need utmost attention. This does not mean that in politically security-sensitive settings no threats to the researchers' security can emanate and that the research context can pose no challenges in a topic-related security sensitive spaces or insecure spaces, but rather, that other challenges might be more demanding or prevalent. The following table sums up which kind of challenges in which dimensions seem to be of importance in politically security-sensitive spaces, topic-related security-sensitive spaces or insecure research spaces.

	<i>politically security-sensitive spaces</i>	<i>topic-related security-sensitive spaces</i>	<i>insecure spaces of research</i>
<i>researcher</i>	<i>lower importance:</i> general safety recommendations for the respective area	<i>lower importance:</i> general safety recommendations for the respective area	<i>high importance:</i> ensuring physical and mental safety and well-being
<i>research context</i>	<i>high importance:</i> data collection process; accessibility to interview partners; sampling; data security	<i>medium importance:</i> choice and access to interview partners;	<i>lower importance:</i> a thorough preparation and knowledge of the field
<i>people involved in the research process</i>	<i>medium importance:</i> trustworthiness	<i>high importance:</i> context specific and trauma-sensitive preparation and realization of fieldwork; giving consent and power hierarchies in interview situations; trustworthiness	<i>high importance:</i> ensuring physical and mental safety and well-being; trustworthiness

Table 1 Key challenges of fieldwork in the respective security-sensitive environment.

Lumping all forms of security-sensitivity together when preparing, conducting and evaluating fieldwork thus overlooks potentially diverse obstacles and proposals for solution that can result in negative outcomes in terms of data, but also implications for the researcher and people involved in the research process. Oftentimes, there is diversity in all different aspects of security-sensitive spaces that researchers need to reflect whilst also being open to general recommendations regarding fieldwork for (early career) researchers.

In the following, we will summarize the findings according to the different types of security-sensitive spaces. In a space that is highly *security-sensitive in a political sense*, the research context is of outmost importance. This includes different steps of the data collection process, namely sampling, accessibility to interview partners and ensuring data security. These aspects might not pose the same challenges in a politically less security-sensitive setting. In a *topically security-sensitive space*, challenges connected to people involved in the research process need the most attention. Hence, context specific and trauma-sensitive preparation and realization of fieldwork are essential, as are giving consent and power hierarchies in interview situations. This also entails the trustworthiness of the researcher. In an *insecure research space*, the focus

should be on challenges connected to the researcher and the other people involved in the research. For this space, diminishing threats to physical safety and ensuring mental well-being is of utmost importance

To conclude, we propose joint lessons learnt and best practices for both cases. They are also based on experiences during our fieldwork in the respective regions that were discussed in the paper and touch upon the researcher, the research context and the people involved in the research process. First and foremost, good and thorough preparation is key for getting the desired outcome of fieldwork without neglecting personal limits. But be ready to improvise, nothing ever goes exactly as planned (Kušić & Záhora 2020). Our experience - as PhD researchers in particular - was that our own expectations, but also at times by other people, regarding outcomes of our field trips were unrealistically high. The pressure to gain enough information to base a whole PhD project on can lead to neglecting personal limits. Therefore, we recommend to identify a number of people you trust both in a social but also thematic sense and check in with them on a regular basis to discuss how your fieldwork is going, whom you are meeting and where you are staying. This can of course be, but will not always be, your supervisor. This is important for your mental wellbeing, but also for security reasons. Think about your own limits in advance, be ready to re-evaluate them and make sure to respect them and, if necessary, reassess your interview goals and targeted population. When doing research with especially vulnerable populations and/or on highly sensitive issues, provide a trauma-sensitive approach and again, respect boundaries – your interview partner’s boundaries and your own.

Moreover, make sure that your interview partners don’t face negative consequences, offer them anonymity, explain your research project in a way that they understand, include the possibility to withdraw the participation in any stage (also after the interview has been conducted). Data security is of utmost importance, especially in security-sensitive settings. Furthermore, issues of confidentiality should always be carefully considered. Structurally, universities as institutions should take their responsibility towards their researchers and their (mental) well-being seriously and offer supervision and support structures – especially for young researchers in precarious employment situations. Unfortunately, this is often not the case. With this paper we also intend to spark discussion about lacking structures for debriefing and supervision of fieldwork at universities. We put forward the argument that it is necessary and helpful to openly discuss the challenges that we face during our research, to share best practices but also openly

admit what didn't work out. Thereby we hope to lobby for the establishment of such structures at universities in order to have such discussions in structured and safe environments.

Whilst we establish lessons learnt and best practices in drawing on the two cases, we don't have the pretention to have established an all-encompassing guideline for fieldwork in a security-sensitive setting. In contrast, we encourage researchers that conduct fieldwork in these environments to engage with our findings, elaborate, criticise and develop them further. Academic researchers and institutions should take the increased responsibility for research participants and personal security of the researcher(s) seriously that occurs when research in a security-sensitive setting is conducted. In our view, a good starting point is to have a scholarly discussion on the implication this sort of research has and to make explicit the specific challenges of fieldwork in security-sensitive settings. This is especially necessary for early career researchers who go on fieldwork for the first time.

4. Literature

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