

Unwilling Participant Observation among Russian *Siloviki* and the Good-Enough Field Researcher

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In 1999, on a trip to Russia to study gender violence, I was sitting in on a special training at a Moscow police academy. In between jokes about the impossibility of prostitutes getting raped, the cops-in-training could not stop focusing on me, the one American and one of three women in a rowdy room. For example, one man loudly asked me whether all Americans had cars and followed up with a comment that, of course we did, because this is where “you” (meaning me) would have sex. The training on rape and sexual harassment that I had come to observe had come to a halt because the new police were so intent on making sexual jokes. These comments felt even more threatening than they might otherwise because, a few days before, I had been picked up by the Russian police, shoved into a police car with several drunken officers, and driven around Moscow until I offered a bribe.

Such events are not isolated. Even outside of Russia I have encountered similar actions and comments from Russians (see Johnson 2009, preface). At an informal gathering of women at a 2006 European Union conference on Russian civil society in Finland, a *silovik*, a well-placed special forces veteran, put his arms around me once he found out I was from the U.S. and asked flippantly if this was sexual harassment. To top off his performance, he proposed a toast in which he hoped the group would find a “man who takes a long time to climax, that brings such relief to a woman that it will take your minds off this [ultranationalist politician Vladimir] Zhirinovsky.”¹ I recently heard from a graduate student who had been in Russia last year and had an even more intimidating experience. She was contacted by what she thought were immigration officials, only to find herself, in response to their request, in a back office being questioned by the FSB, the KGB successor.

Although most were not directly related to the research being conducted, these moments bring into sharp relief the complex situations created for many women doing field research. It is challenging to be a woman on her own doing research in a context where women traveling and working alone is unusual, especially in the many contexts where sexism is tied into a state’s authoritarian tendencies. It is additionally tough when you choose to study gender, the very structure that challenges your freedom in this context. It is even more interesting when you are faced by what you are studying as part of your studying it. From the stance of a critical theorist within political science, this article explores unexamined assumptions that political science as a disci-

pline has about researchers, suggests some practical tactics for field researchers in similarly challenging situations, and concludes with a brief discussion of how being gendered female can make a researcher a better political scientist. Throughout this mix of the theoretical with the practical, I make an argument for a “good-enough field researcher.”

THE GOOD-ENOUGH FIELD RESEARCHER

For the most part, graduate programs in political science do not prepare students for these complex situations nor the practical problems that often result. To address this shortcoming, several researchers (Melani Cammett, Brown University; Lauren Morris MacLean, Indiana University, Bloomington; and Benjamin L. Read, University of California, Santa Cruz) created an APSA short course on fieldwork in 2005. The informative presentation introduced the challenging position of non-male, non-white researchers. They warned, “be prepared for uncomfortable situations: gender, race, sensitive or personal topics.” They gave such helpful advice as to be professional, to portray oneself as “sympathetic and open-minded” and as “independent of and not representing the U.S. government,” and even to “be honest about what you’re studying” but to not feel compelled to “emphasize the most-sensitive aspects.” These were helpful hints regarding the problems one might find and some preliminary thoughts on how to handle some situations.

But, unsurprisingly in a world where we still have a long way to go to address gender and racial inequalities, these suggestions only scratch the surface, much like the typical recommendation to women not to go out alone at night. How can I carry out fieldwork in Russia, especially in the winter months, when it is dark most of the time, and not be outside alone at night? How can I not do the fieldwork that I enjoy and upon which I hope to build my career? How does one prepare for sexism and violence on a first extended research trip when graduate school preparation focuses almost solely on research design? These suggestions not only make impossible many of the most interesting and important research questions, they also imply that it is only the researcher’s responsibility to address these obstacles.

The failure of the discipline to adequately address these problems parallels the failure of the theories and practice of democratic liberalism to ensure women’s full citizenship. As Susan James (1992, 49) argues in the latter case, the assumption of liberalism is that individual citizens are “guaranteed



Lenin Square, Arkhangelsk, 2005

a degree of independence” such that they can speak their views freely. This, in turn, requires that citizens come to the public sphere relatively “free from bodily violation or the threat of it” (50), free from economic dependence, and with the self esteem to “adopt an impartial standpoint” (59). The public-private distinction essential to non-feminist liberalism tends to hide the ways that (certain) men are privileged by these guarantees, while many women are not. Also unexplored are the many institutions required to constitute these guarantees. In contrast to idealized versions of citizenship, James lays out the minimal requirements for a good-enough citizen.

Similarly, good-enough research requires a degree of physical safety, economic independence, and relative impartiality.² While graduate schools have opened their doors to populations that had long been excluded—to white women, to men and women of color, to Jews, and to those without significant family wealth—the assumption, dating from graduate school’s medieval history, that graduate students arrive with this kind of independence has not been challenged. Many Ph.D. programs and other donor organizations confer stipends and fellowships, augmented by dissertation research grants, that give at least middle-class students sufficient resources to economically survive their study. However, we as a discipline do much less to ensure that our students possess the self-esteem to articulate their own theories of politics or, most importantly for this discussion, the physical security that would permit them to devote themselves completely to observation during field research.

Physical security is a problem for many political science researchers in a world where virtually all countries retain social, political, and economic stratification based on sexist, racist, anti-Semitic, and homophobic norms. While white men with resources have more options even in many generally dangerous countries, researchers who are not male or white are faced with legal systems and cultures that do not demand justice for many forms of common violence, such as sexual violence against women or other hate crimes. Where U.S. citizens tend to be privileged, at least globally, is economically. The bribe I was forced to pay in the incident with the Russian police described above was manageable even on graduate funding. As an illustration of the dangers for people who are not white, however, I was picked up for the routine document check because I was walking with a new friend from Burkino Faso. Later, I witnessed low-level Russian officials taunt him with their notions of American-style racism, telling me that I “should take him back to the U.S.” (they assumed he was African American) where “people know how to take care of people like him,” that is, through (as they themselves put it) “lynching.” Given these kinds of situations, it is hardly surprising that so few people of color study Eurasia.

If political science as a discipline is at all committed to social justice, then we must give more thought to ways of ensuring a degree of independence for differently situated researchers, especially for graduate students, the least advantaged among us. Race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, citizen status, etc. are not different identities freely chosen, but positions in society ascribed by politics and resulting in different opportunities to become academics. Moreover, even the assumption that the most privileged among us necessarily have sufficient safety during fieldwork is unwarranted in many of the most politically interesting countries around the world. Safety in fieldwork is one obstacle that the discipline could address at least partially by providing some additional resources (e.g., funds for special equipment, emergency evacuations, legal defense for wrongly held students, etc.) and training on tactics to handle difficult situations.

SOME TACTICS TO HANDLE DIFFICULT SITUATIONS

In more than a decade of fieldwork, I have deployed some tactics that might be helpful for others. First, I took stock of the strengths that I had to take care of myself. I realized that in my own country, the United States, I had gotten myself out of some difficult situations. I have learned to trust my intuitions in discerning dangerous versus safe situations. My body carries its own wisdom, to which I now listen. For example, I tend to get headaches when I have pushed the boundaries of safety too far. I have also learned how to draw upon other people’s authority, upon contacts that I make, even upon the U.S. embassy. In one bad situation, a friend who had been stalked for years by a violent and well-connected Russian man found a sympathetic American at the embassy who had a Russian contact in the FSB; he spoke to this contact, who then “frightened” the stalker, a tactic that she would never have considered in any other circumstance. Dare I voice a truth not mentioned in graduate school: not all information is worth the risk it might take to obtain. There is no perfect researcher,

no complete research, just good-enough researchers with good-enough information. Personal safety is preeminent.

Second, I use technology to keep me connected, but also to permit mobility. I have done fieldwork with a laptop, but now I tend to use a pocket personal computer (PDA) with a detachable keyboard (the new two- to three-pound netbooks might work just as well). Not quite as powerful as a laptop but weighing a lot less, these alternatives allow a researcher to travel with just a small bag. Being able to move more easily means that I can use mass transit, for example, from the airport, sometimes a safer option than catching a cab in an unregulated market. I have also bought a global mobile phone on eBay (some U.S. phones work abroad, but most do not; you can also buy one with a global plan). It is easy and cheap to buy a SIM card at newsstands in most countries, which is the way most countries provide service. Then, make sure to input into the phone the country's emergency number, along with the phone numbers of other resources, such as the U.S. embassy or non-governmental safe havens.

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Third, if possible, it might be helpful to "pass" as much as possible, at least when in public. Adopting the dress and mannerism of the society you are studying, especially in societies where U.S. citizens are sometimes targeted, can provide additional security, especially if you do not look very different from the locals. For those who purposely project difference, it might prove useful to adopt a more conservative appearance, or even to act in more traditional fashion. For example, despite some discomfort at misrepresenting myself and my values, I have long worn a fake wedding ring to head off questions about my traveling alone. I find this eases the concerns many local people have about my status.

For some this may feel like deceit or capitulation to dominant social norms; in this case, norms of femininity. I choose to see it as part of what Chela Sandoval (2000, 55) calls a "differential mode of oppositional consciousness." I draw a lesson from U.S. women of color and global South women who have created strategies of recognizing, adapting to, and battling the power deployed by a specific power apparatus at a specific moment in time because they confront a multiplicity of oppressions. How I represent myself depends on the context and what I hope to accomplish, and this variation of representation, I hope, can contribute to breaking down the assumptions about women's place in societies. Thus, while I may look traditional on the street, I may, for example, speak within small groups with activists and policymakers in a way that illustrates my more radical consciousness. After years of speaking Russian, with its sexist grammar drilled into me at university, I now happily allow "mistakes" that promote

women, such as using female pronouns for groups even when the groups include men. Just as I like to use textbooks written by women when I teach, in order to reinforce the authority of women within political science, I find these linguistic cues to be a powerful affirmation. Fieldwork is more productive when I tactically shift between these various identities, passing sometimes as an insider and at other times asserting my identity as a radical (and privileged) outsider professor.

Fourth, I like to use these kinds of experiences in my thinking and writing about what I study. It was ironic to be in the position—even if temporarily and incompletely—of many women in Russia of being harassed by those who are supposed to protect. In several of these cases, I initially felt the sense of shame that the dominant norms often script for women who are victims of male violence; but afterwards, I was able to find my anger. I now like to tell these stories over and over again as illustrations of the sexism that most people today deny is still so prevalent. I can call out powerful Russians for their sexist behavior in ways my Russian counter-

parts may not be able to do without suffering social or financial consequences.

Lastly, I changed my research topic, or at least my approach to the research topic. As much as I wanted to do it all—and to do it in a potentially dangerous context—I decided that I would much rather study women's organizing than police response to gender violence, because I would rather spend time with women activists. I have also branched out, doing work in the nearby Nordic countries, where sexism is more muted and the authorities more supportive. Changing topics may also seem like capitulation, but fieldwork, in the end, is part of our career, a career I chose because I wanted to do it over the long term. In the long run, I can only be a subversive political scientist if I keep myself safe—and enjoyment is a fine feminist goal.

THE BENEFITS OF BEING GENDERED FEMALE

I would be remiss in this analysis if I did not also point out some benefits of being more of an outsider, especially in my case, and of being gendered female. Most simply, being a woman may make one stand out in certain male-dominated contexts, such as almost all parliaments around the world. Despite the potential downsides described above, sometimes powerful men may decide to pay special attention to a woman, sometimes in a paternalistic way that results in a side of the story that male researchers will not obtain. The outsider position may draw you deeper into questions of inclusion and exclusion, essential elements of power often overlooked by mainstream political science. Other times, you may be less obtrusive because you are "just a woman." Powerful people

may decide that you need even more explaining—providing richer detail for your project—or they may simply leave you alone to observe the unfolding events.

Being a woman can also make some people more comfortable, especially other women, who are more likely to invite you into intimate conversations or the intimate spaces of their homes. The Russian women activists I study have often generously invited me into their homes, even to stay overnight in their apartments, giving me tremendous access and trusting me in ways I suspect they would not for most men researchers. I learned a lot about the suddenly rich “New Russians” from sitting in saunas with women and simply listening to them talking to each other—or even on the Chicago L in the early 1990s before Russian was common in U.S. cities. Even men can open up in new ways when you begin to talk about so-called women’s issues, such as about their children, establishing some trust before you branch out to more controversial topics. Guilt in response to their bad behavior might even prove helpful. The Russian silovik who proposed the off-color toast was, in the harsh morning light, eager to explain his work to establish regional public chambers in Russia.³

Most importantly, find a way to do the fieldwork you want to do—and to survive for future research—using whatever tactics work, given the lack of institutional support for researchers’ physical security. The creativeness of such intrepid good-enough field researchers is essential to the continued expansion of political science knowledge. ■

NOTE

I am grateful for the questions and comments posed by the editors of this symposium, Candice Orbals and Meg Rincker, as well as for their championing such an important discussion. I thank also Belinda Cooper, Lauren McCarthy, and Celina Su for their feedback, and others who wish to be unnamed for sharing their stories and insight.

1. Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, a member of the Russian Duma since 1993, is the founder and leader of the misnamed Liberal Democratic Party of Russia. He is frequently in the public eye for making outlandish statements. Several years ago, I heard him say at a rally that mothers are to blame for Russian young men engaging in so much brawling; the solution is that the mothers should hire prostitutes for their sons.
2. Cultural feminists and poststructuralists critique this notion of impartiality, arguing that the ideal is never met in practice (James 1992). This is where the notion of reflexivity emerges (see Candice Orbals and Meg Rincker’s introduction to this symposium). I am not taking a stance on positivism versus relativism in this essay. My assertion is a more limited one, much like James, that some level of impartiality is required for social science or else one is left with only an examination from one’s own perspective, shaped only by personal relationships with one’s families.
3. Regional public chambers are local versions of the national Public Chamber that Putin established to corral civil society.

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