Positionality, Personal Insecurity, and Female Empathy in Security Studies Research

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"He is a very nice man. There is no need to be scared or worried," said Mr. Saikia[1], the driver of the car that was carrying me to a high-profile interviewee. He had correctly guessed that I was worried about an impending meeting with a known Assamese ex-insurgent. A woman traveling alone in India can confront a high level of personal risk, and, I was seeking interviews with people whom the state had routinely described as "terrorists," "insurgents," "militants," and "murderers."

I had been asked to be present at a predetermined pick-up location with instructions to bring no one else and not to mention this meeting to anyone. It was only 5 pm. We came to a halt before a white gate that was guarded by large men carrying assault rifles and holstered handguns. Three SUVs were parked outside in the dirt track that led to this dwelling.

I spent the next three hours interviewing a former militant of the United Liberation Front of Assam, who was one of its highest-ranking officials during the 1990s. He surrendered for personal and ideological reasons and was granted freedom from prosecution under the Government of India's surrender policy for insurgents. This pattern repeated itself a few more times over the next three years, and almost always involved all male environments with heavily armed men.

My research is on differential counterinsurgency strategies of the Indian state. Northeast India, the "field" for my project, is a region that has seen up to 56 tribal insurgent groups operating during the last 60 years with varying degrees of success and longevity. My task was to study perceptions of the Indian state about its insurgent adversaries. For this, I began by gaining access to local police and paramilitary organizations that were heavily engaged in counterinsurgency. I documented their interviews and the small bits of information they provided about how insurgencies are conducted.

I conducted fieldwork in northeast India[2] and in central India between 2008 and 2011. In northeast India levels of state violence and insurgent violence have been consistently high for six decades. Civilian and security forces casualties have been high as well, and despite transparent electoral processes, people remain suspicious of the Indian state. Socially, the landscape consists of hundreds of tribal and subtribal groups, and racially, most of these tribes look more East Asian and Southeast Asian than the typical South Asian, and practice different religions.

To broaden the scope of my study, I also began studying the Indian state's counterinsurgency response to the tribal Maoists that operate in Chhattisgarh state. These responses included the raising of a private armed tribal militia called the *Salwa Judum*, which was later declared unconstitutional by the Indian Supreme Court.[3] I was in Chhattisgarh to study subcontracted counterinsurgency campaigns. I conducted 120 interviews with counterinsurgency personnel, surrendered and current militants, journalists, academics, local bureaucrats, local economic and political elites, students, and other people sympathetic to insurgencies in their areas.

Some of the articles in this symposium highlight the difficulty in gaining access to communities, such as in China (Scoggins), or in collecting quantitative data (Jensenius). I relied more on my training as a journalist, than on my methods training, to gain access to communities. In every location, I contacted the bureau chiefs and stringers of news channels and local papers and presented them with my credentials. This way, I also obtained some very sensitive interviews, which were given confidentially. When people heard that I had written for some Indian newspapers and magazines, they were more likely to help and more willing to talk. I presented them with the plan of my research and the main questions I was trying to answer. Some even made suggestions on my project proposal.

Although I was conducting fieldwork technically in my own country, I was unprepared for the linguistic, religious, and racial diversity I saw. The tight-knit tribal communities meant that if I showed up in one place, most people knew what I was doing by the end of the week. This made it easier to get interviews.

POLITICAL SCIENCE AND THE "FIELD"

Political science teaches us to see a particular geographical region as the "field," construed as a cluster of measurable independent and dependent variables. The people I was studying were political actors; their strategies and political decisions and competing rationales would become the bulwark of a massive dissertation on Indian counterinsurgency. These individuals ceased to be actors, data points or sound-bytes to me. They become friends, protectors, and guides.

The field is a constantly evolving, dynamic, and unpredictable universe. Qualitative investigations into the field are movements through social spaces that are designed and redesigned as they are moved through by a researcher (Tewksbury and Gagné 1997). The field offers several challenges to the best research designs, and often research projects are altered beyond recognition.

Anthropologists and sociologists have written at length about positionality (Chacko 2004; Sultana 2007), insider/outsider status

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(Sherif 2001), buy-ins into different communities (especially stigmatized ones), and status similarity between the researcher and the researched (Tewksbury and Gagné 1997). Such writing that focuses on the trials and triumphs of fieldwork also rests on the intensely personal experiences that fieldwork offers researchers.

No two researchers have the exact same fieldwork experiences because no two researchers are the same. The researcher's identity leads to the calibration of fieldwork experiences that can be fraught with tension if, for instance, the researcher studies a stigmatized community and cannot show empathy (Tewksbury and Gagné 1997) or it can smooth the course of fieldwork if the researcher shares some status similarity with the researched.

Positionality is the relative position of an individual vis-à-vis others, or, how an individual is situated in society in terms of class, caste, gender, ethnic identity, sexual orientation, and so forth. (Chacko 2004; Katz 1994; Mohanty 1988). A researcher's positionality has some effect on the answers she gets.[4]

IDENTITY AND POSITIONALITY

Positionality is often a proxy for relations of power. Some people are more equal than others, and most societies work on this premise. In this context, when researchers proceed into a different geolocation to study political outcomes and processes, they bring a set of competing identities, which interact with the identities of people in the field creating several social and ethical dynamics that often inform research projects. Positionality also has an effect on the personality of the researcher because it often means moving from a position of relative power to one of disempowerment or one where there is less mobility. For female researchers, it could involve moving from a relatively permissive social environment to one where women's clothing, movement, and behavior is closely monitored (Sherif 2001). The opposite is also possible. White male researchers are reported to have an easier time studying closed societies than, for instance, a female researcher of any race (Tewksbury and Gagné 1997).

These situational permutations of the self/other, insider/outsider, gender, caste and/or race dynamics of the researcher while doing fieldwork inform the researcher's project and the access, acceptability, and answers she gets. This situation has led some scholars to argue for the "management of the fieldwork" identity, by revealing less or more information to make the researcher more socially acceptable (Tewksbury and Gagné 1997).

The management of fieldwork identity becomes important because the basis of any relationship between the researcher and the researched in qualitative research projects rests on the perceptions that each has about the other. These perceptions are amplified by interpretations of others' behavior. For instance, a researcher's ability/inability to speak the local language can facilitate access or impede it. Many researchers can often manipulate self-presentation to get a more credible buy-in into a community, often a stigmatized one.

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"DON'T YOU GET SCARED WHILE DOING ALL THIS?" – MANAGING BEING FEMALE IN SECURITY STUDIES RESEARCH IN INDIA

Little discussion exists about the experience of female researchers who conduct research in conflict zones and work directly with actual conflict actors. Women who study security are aware that this field of research is still shaped by male researchers and often abide by high degrees of professional standards. They often do not articulate gender issues they face in the field for fear of being seen as weak-kneed by their colleagues.

During three years of fieldwork, I was exposed to personal insecurity, sometimes had my ideas put down by men or "mansplained" some very obvious issues. I recount here a few instances of how I managed fieldwork identity to enhance my personal security by reducing the risk of predatory behavior and gain the trust of people who were uncomfortable with talking to female outsiders.

CHHATTISGARH, INDIA: NEGOTIATING THE LIMITS OF PERSONAL INDEPENDENCE

Two armed men of the Border Security Force (BSF) were driving me to the Counterinsurgency and Jungle Warfare College in a Maoist dominated district called Kanker, in Chhattisgarh state in January 2011. Our vehicle was a white SUV with fake license plates. It was a four-hour drive between my base in Raipur city and Kanker. There were no stops on the way and we drove as fast as possible for security reasons. The fake license plates and civilian make of the SUV were to ensure that no Maoists attacked the vehicle. Misdirection was the key to survival for the BSF officers.

As an Indian woman, from an upper-caste background, operating under the protection of the BSF, I was supposed to play by the rules that govern Indian women: no skin showing, no unnecessary chatter and familiarity (often called fraternizing by the Indian military men). I was dressed traditionally and spoke little although I knew I could get come candid commentary on this four-hour nonstop ride. Finally one of the escorts, whose assault rifle rattled at his feet, broke the silence and said, "Madam, don't you get scared while doing all this?"

I thought about this for a moment. Through the three years I had traveled alone in conflict zones, many men had chosen bemusement or predation as a form of response to a single woman in her late 20s trying to, in their mind, meddle in the affairs of men. I wondered if this was an earnest question born out of curiosity, or if this was some sort of entry into a session where I would be warned about "girls like me" traveling alone. Given the South Asian context, where working women are routinely

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seen as lacking in "character" by different groups of men, I heard these warnings several times from various men *and* women.

I said quietly, "If people like you are along, I have no reason to be afraid." In this response I had put the onus of protection and responsibility on the men who accompanied me. I was managing my identity through careful sartorial decisions and minimum speech. My response to their question broke the ice. They felt more powerful. I had talked to them in Hindi, assumed the role of someone who needed protection (a very feminine role in India), and the BSF men were suddenly talking about the Maoists with a strange amount of sympathy, albeit, reducing the Maoists to primitive tribals with no sense of politics.

I offered honest details when quizzed and showed interest in their families. This allowed me to carry the tag of being a "homely girl." After half an hour, I shifted the discussion to the operations of the Maoists and what I should expect from the counterinsurgency school. Another hour later, I was being referred to as *didi*, which means "elder sister."

I had, in my mind, successfully managed being seen as "respectable." Assuming a traditional Indian woman's role was a tough matter personally because it involved giving up an independent identity and assuming the mantle of tradition under which the rules that govern Indian women can be quite severe and disempowering. I had made a simple calculation: I would gain no cooperation from the men if I defied their perception of how Indian women should behave. I was already defying it by being a single woman, traveling alone, without a brother, father, uncle, husband. I didn't need to push that image any further.

Other female researchers working in middle-eastern countries have faced similar dilemmas. However, the crucial thing female researchers report is that choice of dress and capacity to manage and manipulate personal identity sends signals that are interpreted by people in the field (Sherif 2001). As researchers, this can raise ethical dilemmas. If we want honest answers from interviewees to very personal questions that we pose and if we are recording very personal insights of the people we study, are we unethical in manipulating our fieldwork identities?

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I think about this in terms of access and security. For me, my personal security was paramount. I needed the men to feel responsible for my security, and I had to earn my own safety from them. Translating the researcher-researched dynamic into one that was a more familial one, where I was a "sister" and they my *bhaisaabs* or brothers, achieved both.

MEGHALAYA, INDIA: ON BEING GIVEN AN IDENTITY

In November 2008, I arrived in the northeastern state of Meghalaya, home to four active insurgent groups. I was aware of the extent of disaffection many groups in the region felt toward the Indian state and how they had a natural tendency to distrust anyone from what they called "mainland" India. For the previous two months, however, I had lived in Guwahati, in Assam, where many Assamese still thought of themselves as Indian. So I was surprised when I found that in Meghalaya I had a new identity: a "mainlander." [5]

A mainlander was an Indian who did not possess northeastern racial characteristics, spoke Hindi or some affiliated language, watched Bollywood movies, and did not tolerate separatism of any kind. Mainlander was code for "unsympathetic outsider." I was marked for exclusion. I decided that to accept the label but present myself as an empathetic outsider would be the best strategy to overcome hurdles placed by lack of access. As far as I could tell, the problem with my position was that I was seen as someone who could not understand tribal society, was of the wrong race and religion, and *must* be sympathetic to the Indian state project.

My first brush with the antagonism against mainlanders came during an interview I did with a local student leader of an exclusivist group. My interviewee, Mr. L., started the interview in English saying, "Our entire movement was directed against people like you. We wanted to drive you guys away". In Meghalaya the local Khasi tribe held a long-standing economic grievance against Hindu merchants from the mainland. In the 1980s the Khasi launched a massive political agitation to drive away Marwari Hindu traders. This movement was initially led by students of the Khasi Students Union, but soon there were other similar groups that mushroomed (Sirnate 2009). Mr. L. belonged to one such associated group.

The line was delivered with much vehemence. Mr. L had also provided an audience of two other people from his group. I made the decision to not be kowtowed by his offensive. Instead, I ignored it and proceeded with the interview as if nothing had happened. I made sure to pepper my questions with lines that I believed Mr. L needed to hear: "Perhaps this is hard for you to talk about," "that sounds like a very tough situation that you had to deal with," "I am so sorry to hear that they arrested your friend," "I hope the government listens to your group."

During the next two hours, the interview proceeded with some measure of language difficulty but I was able to get good behavioral responses and turned what could have been an even harder or shorter conversation into something more useful. Mr. L, who had become much easier to talk to as the interview progressed, left that afternoon promising that he would show me around rural Meghalaya, shook my hand, and thanked me for coming.

I had used empathy to deal with what I thought was a bad situation. To Mr. L, I symbolized New Delhi, which he saw as an agent of domination over his people. I had been completely honest about my research project, and he knew I had "connections" with the military. His distrust and initial aggression was understandable, if not justified.

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It was important to the objectivity of the research project that I not be seen as someone who endorsed the problematic manner in which the Indian state operated in northeast India. I used female empathy to gain the confidence of Mr. L. In an odd way, I fell into yet another gender trap where women are seen as nonaggressive and placating. Perhaps, because I did not respond to his comment, he may have later seen my empathetic statements as the performance of a gender role he was comfortable with and could understand.

CONCLUSIONS: MANAGING IDENTITY IN CHALLENGING CONTEXTS

In the initial months of fieldwork, I was clear that I was an inquirer. What mattered was my professional identity and I hoped that because I did not assert a personal cultural identity, no one else would either. In both instances that I have described, strong political points had been made.

Now, I discuss an issue that is subsumed in much writing on fieldwork and methods: the possibility of sexual predation during fieldwork. India is a country where sexual harassment and violence against women occurs on a fairly regular basis. As an outsider, who was unable to speak local languages, I took extreme precautions to safeguard my personal security. This meant setting clear rules for fieldwork— what time to venture out and when to return (never after dark because of the lack of public transport), what to wear, and how to present myself (clothes that provided full coverage and an acceptance of temporary disempowerment), how long to stay during an interview in someone's office, planning an exit strategy for each interview, especially those conducted in strange locations.

During the course of fieldwork, I drifted in and out of various roles. I was sometimes a knowledgeable outsider and at other times an empathetic one. I was also diffident when required and learned how to set boundaries quickly during interviews. I was careful not to demonstrate any one political preference and also cautious about my interviews with military actors. When talking with the coercive arm of the state, I was cautious about not revealing anything about my sources from the underground. Also, I was careful to emphasize that empathy with an interviewee did not imply sameness. It may sound as if I had a well-devised strategy and had thought through these issues before stepping into the field. However, the rules and norms and strategies evolved on a case-by-case basis. ■

NOTES

1. Name changed to protect identity.
2. I worked in the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur.
3. See "Supreme Court Judgment in Salwa Judum Case", in *The Hindu,* July 6, 2011. Can be accessed online at http://www.thehindu.com/news/resources/supreme-court-judgment-in-salwa-judum-case/article2185766.ece
4. These answers are not always the product of a methodological individualistic encounter between the researcher and the researched. In India, for instance, a question posed to one person often involves a response generated by a surrounding collective and such socially produced responses may defy the survey method. See Rudolph(. 2005).
5. Because I had mostly used a snowball sample to gain interviews, I was often referred to as a mainlander on phone conversations where I heard only one side of the conversation. The person recommending me for a meeting would often say, "she is a mainlander."

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