The Limits of Control? Conducting Fieldwork at the United Nations

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When I went to New York for the first time to conduct doctoral fieldwork at the United Nations (UN), I was expecting the unexpected. Using an interpretive framework in my Ph.D. project, I was aware that the process of 'diving into the field' (Yanow 2007, 116) implies changes, unexpected developments and last minute modifications of schedules and plans. Furthermore, I understood that I would arrive with preconceptions and expectations about my subject of study. Agreeing that 'there is no such thing as first contact' (Neumann and Neumann 2018, 1), I was aware of the situated construction of knowledge. Having read about it and having planned with this in mind, I was actually looking forward to facing the unexpected. And yet, when such situations occurred, for example when much anticipated interviews were cancelled or certain diplomatic practices of non-elected Council members turned out to be more important than I expected, it caught me by surprise. It took me a while to realise that this feeling of confusion – as uncomfortable as it felt at that time – was an important part of becoming sensitised to the situatedness of my knowledge of the field.

Fieldwork helped me to better understand the UN as my subject of study, but my insights were informed by a particular perspective. In order to get access to the UN, I formally gained the status of a civil society representative. While I was at no time pretending to actually represent a civil society organisation (CSO), it defined formally how the UN would treat me and significantly affected my opportunities to get access, gain insights, and interact with the field. Irrespective of all my careful planning and my reliance on a reflexive and interpretive methodology, the scope of this positionality surprised me. Ultimately, I did not want to miss out on experiencing the situatedness of my fieldwork knowledge. As a first-time field researcher, however, it made me wonder first and foremost about the limits of control of my fieldwork.

Of Plans and Realities

My fieldwork was part of a doctoral research project on the Security Council's primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security. I was particularly interested in the role of justification as a practice of normative ordering (Niemann 2019). Defined as 'situated judgements' (Boltanski and Thévenot 2000), justifications are based on local and momentary references to knowledge, normative standards, and value claims. As such practices are not directly accessible, I used an interpretive framework, which considered knowledge to be situated in the local context of a research process (Wagenaar 2011, 23; Yanow 2006, 13). Interpretivism argues that this situatedness stems from an inextricable connection between the worlds of the knower and the known (Jackson 2011, 37). As the production of knowledge results from the researcher's embeddedness in his or her subject of study, this knowledge is inevitably an intersubjective and context-dependent construction. An interpretive research framework, thus, allows but also requires an open and reflexive research process for capturing the dynamics of this contextual construction of knowledge (Flick 2009, 20; Fine and Shulman 2009, 178). Therefore, I considered unexpected results not as failures of my research design, but as the very process of generating contextualised knowledge about my field. I also relied on the circularity of an interpretive research framework by taking into account a constant back and forth between the various steps of the research process (e.g. research design,

The Limits of Control? Conducting Fieldwork at the United Nations

Written by Holger Niemann

operationalisation, data collection) (Yanow 2007, 118; Bueger and Gadinger 2014, 80). I took into account the need to constantly adapt my research process to the situation in the field, to be open to disruptions and changes as well as unexpected and surprising results. At the same time, my fieldwork also had to meet relatively practical requirements. These included my supervisors' expectations that I would return with 'proper' results, the funding agency's formal requirements that my proposed project outcomes were met, and ultimately my personal motivation to succeed in this endeavour. These practicalities created expectations regarding the conduct and outcome of my fieldwork as well.

When I arrived in New York, things turned out differently from what I had planned. Prior knowledge plays an important role in interpretive research as a driving force of knowledge production (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012, 25). I was conscious of the fact that the unexpected situations I found myself in represented textbook examples of how entering the field questioned prior knowledge. This is precisely what should happen when entering the field, as it generates the very 'condition for surprise' (Wagenaar 2011, 243) necessary from an interpretive perspective. Nevertheless, the scope of my situatedness was bewildering. It also made me realise the challenge of turning words into deeds when using an interpretive methodology. All of a sudden, my situatedness became a matter of questioning the success of my fieldwork, instead of providing a safeguard for ensuring the standards of my interpretive methodology were met. It took a while before I realised that this confusion is not only an inevitable part of the fieldwork experience (Wagenaar 2011, 245), but is ultimately also a source of unexpected and important insights into the UN and its practices. Uncomfortable as this situation was in the first place, this positionality was precisely the source of knowledge I was looking for.

A Particular Perspective on the UN

Elite institutions are known for being difficult to access and pose a challenge for fieldwork (Kuus 2013). This holds true for the UN as well. Sometimes scholars get access by becoming a delegate of a permanent mission (Schia 2013; Barnett 1997), or working within the UN bureaucracy (Mülli 2018). In my case, access was granted through accreditation with a CSO. The UN has a reputation for being often a shuttered place for CSO representatives. It is an intergovernmental organisation designed to serve the purposes of member states. Unlike in fields such as human rights or development, the field of peace and security is especially difficult to access for CSOs as consultation mechanisms are highly informal, decision-making processes often take place behind closed doors and CSO representatives experience a lack of transparency and public information. Knowing about this ahead of the fieldwork, I was aware of the limits of my status. Furthermore, I was usually very clear on my role as an academic conducting research when interacting with people in the field. I considered this primarily a matter of formal status and was not especially interested in acting as a CSO representative. However, I was surprised by how much I became subject to the peculiarities of my formal status. In the following, I describe three different situations from which I gained specific insights due to my particular status when being in the field. In all three instances, I expected my initial plans to be challenged by the everyday realities. However, ultimately they became much more important as they contributed to a particular understanding of my subject of study. It was only when reflecting on these situations that I realised that it was precisely in these moments that situated knowledge about the UN was generated.

The Limited Openness of the UN

The UN is first and foremost an intergovernmental organisation. It is constituted through its member states, which are represented in New York by delegates of their permanent missions. The UN is also an international bureaucracy consisting of a large body of staff. Civil society is neither formally part of the UN, nor is the UN – especially in the field of peace and security – particular well known for its openness towards CSO representatives. Nevertheless, CSO representatives play an important, yet informal, role in politics at the UN. They may act as agenda-setters, provide expertise, or lobby for stakeholders and because of that can be considered to be part of what has been labelled a 'third UN' next to delegates from UN member states and the UN bureaucracy (Weiss et al. 2009).

CSO representatives are frequently seen at the UN headquarters, interacting with delegates from UN member states and staff from the UN bureaucracy in various ways. At the same time, they have a particular kind of access to the UN, and especially to the Security Council. Numerous everyday instances reminded me of the differences between these three UNs and their distinctive, yet overlapping life worlds. My status allowed me to move around freely in the

The Limits of Control? Conducting Fieldwork at the United Nations

Written by Holger Niemann

UN headquarters, and to access numerous official meetings of the UN and its various sub-bodies. However, I was only allowed to attend public Security Council meetings. While these meetings are important as formal sites for voting on agenda items, the literature often emphasises that the informal negotiations ahead of these meetings and meetings closed to the public, are much more important for the actual decision-making processes. Due to my status, I was unable to attend such meetings. However, being able to observe public Security Council meetings actually helped me in better understanding the importance of these meetings as a site for public justifications.

While I realised how much the UN is indeed an intergovernmental organisation that gives CSO representatives a different role, these public Council meetings also demonstrated to me how important the public nature of the justificatory claims made in the Security Council actually is. As claims of legitimacy or values, justifications can unfold their purpose in such settings, because their publicity provides the audiences necessarily needed for seeking recognition of justificatory practices by others. Justification can become relevant in the UN Security Council, because it can be explicated in public settings.

Concrete and Blurring Boundaries of the UN

Another moment of learning about the situatedness of my knowledge was when I realised the simultaneity of concrete and blurring boundaries in the UN. At first sight, there is no doubt about the concrete nature of the UN's boundaries. The complex of the UN headquarters is clearly identifiable, not only due to the prominence of its buildings, but also because of the massive security architecture of fences, walls, and barriers surrounding it. Furthermore, entering the UN complex marks a clear line between inside and outside, with security checks and – depending on status – long queues to enter the site. I often physically experienced the fact that particular routes were closed to me due to my CSO affiliation. This held true, for example, for pathways through UN staff offices, elevators and areas with different designations. Often when I walked around the UN complex, I learned that my ID card, necessary to pass through electronic checkpoints and gates, prevented me without explanation from entering certain areas. Checkpoints determined my routes through the buildings, while security checks and the denial of access to particular parts of the UN headquarters became an important element of my daily transformation into a CSO representative in the eyes of the UN authorities when entering UN grounds.

Cleary identifiable boundaries also defined my position and my activities within the Security Council. The Security Council chamber has designated areas for the various audiences, not only defining different spaces, but also defining the competences of their respective occupants (Niemann 2019, 211). Delegates from UN member states, for example, are able to interact with Council members informally during meetings, while visitors are not permitted to move around the chamber, other than to leave via designated exits. Hence, interaction is prohibited and even access to information is limited. Papers and documents, which are sometimes circulated at short-notice in the chamber, are not available to the public in the visitors' gallery, with the implication that taking notes becomes crucial. I was literally trying to make sense of what was going on at the centre of the chamber by observing and taking notes.

While I could not directly speak with diplomats in these situations, I was able to observe how delegates interacted with each other and study the various practices diplomats performed in advance of Council meetings, to get an understanding of how social relations, the architecture of the Security Council chamber and diplomatic practices represented what has been called the 'dance' of multilateral diplomacy (Smith 2006). In correspondence with the architecture of the Council chamber, my formal status allowed me to look from a distance on this 'dance'. Unlike the diplomats actually performing the 'dance' at the centre of the Council chamber, my bird's-eye view allowed me to get a fuller perspective of their movements and how they interacted not only with each other, but also with the materialities of the Council chamber. Hence, my formal status defined not only where I was physically permitted to sit, talk, and walk, but also how I was able to conduct research. Coping with the material manifestations of the UN headquarters, but also how diplomats interacted with its symbols and objects, sensitised me for the manifestation of particular power relations and generated a certain type of knowledge.

At the same time, I learned the extent to which the UN is also a multi-sited field with blurring boundaries. Besides the permanent missions of UN members, an array of liaison offices from other international organisations and CSOs, think tanks and academic institutions that also work on and with the UN exist in close proximity to the UN

The Limits of Control? Conducting Fieldwork at the United Nations

Written by Holger Niemann

headquarters. While wandering around, it struck me how much the entire neighbourhood at times actually constituted 'the field'. Unlike the UN complex with its strict protocol, these sites came with more unclear competences and mobilities. Security provisions in permanent missions, for example, varied considerably. Sometimes security clearances were difficult to obtain, with any electronic devices prohibited and checkpoints to be passed before I was taken to an anonymous meeting room. In other instances, I sat directly at the desk of my interviewee, often after walking through the offices of the permanent missions and getting an impression of the diverse ways they are organised. In addition, there were also a number of interspaces on the UN complex, such as floors, cafeterias, or the reading room of the Dag Hammarskjöld library, that were distinctive informal meeting zones. Here again the boundaries between inside and outside get distorted, as they provide spaces for encountering a diverse set of actors. These interspaces differed significantly in form and function, demonstrating the simultaneity of the concrete and blurring boundaries of my field.

Immersing Myself in the Rhythm of the UN

During my fieldwork, I was aware that 'being in the field' is a dynamic and often contingent activity. Timing is often more accidental than a matter of careful planning, with plans changing at short notice and the results of fieldwork subject to unpredictable developments. Therefore, I was expecting my schedules to be provisional. What surprised me, though, was the scope of becoming immersed in the particular rhythm of the UN. The UN calendar follows a specific course, which starts in September with the opening of the General Assembly. Due to funding formalities, my fieldwork partly fell in that period, which is usually not the best time for conducting fieldwork at the UN: Permanent missions are very busy preparing their governments' visits, the UN bureaucracy is completely focused on conducting the General Assembly, and the entire city is on alert due to the attendance of numerous heads of state. This affected, for example, the availability of interview partners, especially in smaller permanent missions, which were occupied with preparing for the General Assembly. At the same time, it helped me to better understand the annual life cycle of the UN.

Once I arrived at the UN, I became immersed in the daily schedule of the Security Council. The Council is by and large an ad-hoc body and much of its agenda is only planned provisionally. The monthly schedule, consisting of regular topics such as biannual discussions on topics such as the protection of civilians or mission mandate extension, is often complemented by meetings scheduled on short notice due to unforeseeable political circumstances. Thus, one of my everyday practices was to check the Journal of the United Nations, a daily publication that announces meetings and events at the UN. Nevertheless, my schedules were frequently subject to change, as high-profile diplomats in particular often had to cancel or relocate interviews at short-notice. Waiting, which often literally meant sitting in front of an office, became a frequent practice. At the same time, this waiting provided the occasion for reflection and writing-up memos or notes, and spending time in some of the interspaces, such as the UN cafeteria or semi-open floors, where I could attune myself to the rhythms of the UN at various times of day. Despite the frustration when interviews were rescheduled, the feeling of being driven by the heartbeat of the UN was significant in better understanding the UN's practices.

Explicating the Partiality of Fieldwork

Supposed fieldwork failures can lead to 'productive irritations' (Kurowska 2019, 85). The previous section gave insights into unexpected situations I faced during fieldwork and how my status allowed me to gain situated knowledge from such 'productive irritations'. Without overemphasising the impact of my formal status, it was an important source for getting a particular view on the UN. If I had a different role, my understanding of what the UN is and does would certainly have been a different one. Despite my attempts to be best prepared by reading numerous manuals and books on how to conduct fieldwork, these 'productive irritations' were confusing at first. Ultimately, however, this partial view on the UN was intriguing. It took a while for me to come to this conclusion, but it was important for better understanding how situated knowledge is actually constructed. Therefore, greater reflection, both on the challenges such confusing situations pose, and their potential for gaining insights seems advisable to me.

Obtaining access to the field, being able to generate data, establish networks and become acquainted with the field was important to me. As probably for every field researcher, I felt that 'not knowing is hard to tolerate' (Kurowska

The Limits of Control? Conducting Fieldwork at the United Nations
Written by Holger Niemann

2019, 76). Fieldwork, therefore, came with a certain interest in making sure telling things would actually happen when entering the field.

Although I knew that the realities in the field would not always meet my expectations, the scope of my positionality still surprised me. Ultimately, however, such situations became an important source of the kind of situated knowledge about my subject of study – knowledge that I was actually looking for. If fieldwork is precisely about that, then explicating our own situatedness and the partiality of the results it brings about is the first step in understanding supposed fieldwork failures as important sources of knowledge production. Since field researchers want to make the best of their work, they need to be opportunistic with those they talk to and what they observe (Fine and Shulman 2009, 179; Flick 2009, 226). This opportunism also generates the flexibility needed for adapting a research project to the complexities of the field. Being explicit about the opportunistic moves we made in the field, as much as about the limits in doing so, seems more honest with regard to the sources of our situated knowledge, and at the same time helps us understand not only the ways in which our field research occurs, but also how much our own situatedness is driven by questions of accessibility, power, and control. Explicating our own positionality points to the role of power relations in processes of knowledge construction (Haraway 1988), which is a longstanding issue in conceptualising fieldwork.

Fieldwork is a partial insight and it is necessary to reflect upon this partiality (Sjoberg 2019, 89). Therefore, we should strive for greater transparency in acknowledging the complexity of our fields, as well as the confusion our own situatedness can cause in the course of the research process. These are no trivialities, instead 'the limits of the art are part of the data' (Fine and Shulman 2009, 192). It remains to be discussed, though, how field researchers can actually achieve this. Some have argued that they should turn to autoethnography (Brigg and Bleiker 2010), others have pointed to the need for becoming aware of the underlying hegemonic discourses affecting the production of knowledge (Kurowska 2019). This particular volume talks about 'failures' and their importance for successful knowledge production. Irrespective of the avenue chosen, engaging in scholarly dialogue on the impact of situatedness, the limits and possibilities of particular roles in the field, as well as the confusion created by actually facing such situations seems vital for better understanding how situated knowledge is generated. It would allow us to develop different understandings of 'fieldwork failures' and reflect on how these challenges, as frustrating they may be at times, ultimately lead to precisely the surprising insights that motivate us to 'dive into the field'. There are no linear ways to cope with the challenges of fieldwork (Wagenaar 2011, 246). Talking and writing about how our research benefits from them – or not – seems an important, if not necessary, part of conducting fieldwork.

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The Limits of Control? Conducting Fieldwork at the United Nations
Written by Holger Niemann

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