Tears and Laughter: Affective Failure and Mis/recognition in Feminist IR Research

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This discussion of fieldwork failure draws on my experience conducting research in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) in 2015 as part of my doctoral studies which focused on the legacies of wartime sexual violence. Seeking to understand how complex subjects are produced by and produce themselves against post-conflict justice processes, this research located a series of intersecting frames of recognition. Inspired by Judith Butler (2006; 2009), these frames were visibility, legal-bureaucratic recognition, psychological recognition and witnessing. In this research, emotion and affect were central. Initially recorded in the margins of my fieldwork diary and spilling into conversations with friends and family over Skype, the practice of writing with and through emotion became both an ethical imperative and a way to more fully attend to the multiple inflections of recognition within post-conflict justice. In writing this chapter, I have been prompted to reflect on this process with regard to its successes and failures. Putting instances of tears and laughter into focus, I suggest that emotions, affect, and their failures structure the research encounter in significant, and often, productive ways. Tears and laughter are examined as *productive affective failures* that, on further reflection, enabled both renewed insight and an embodied knowledge of the research context.

The chapter re-examines two interviews which draw forth these aspects of emotion and affect in the research encounter. Both interviews take place in the broader context of the preparation of witnesses for war crimes trials, with each organisation occupying a different position in the post-conflict justice milieu. The first failure takes place during the second of two interviews with a psychotherapist based at Vive žene (Vive Women) in Tuzla. Here, I reflect on tears as a complex, affective response that enables further understanding of the complexities within the psychological governance framework. The second focuses on an interview with Žene žrtve rata (Women Victims of War), a prominent survivor association in Sarajevo. Here, I reflect on the perception of laughter in the research encounter, focusing on how this provoked a moment of disconnect and reoriented the interview toward renewed understanding. In each case, I reflect on my interview transcripts, the writing of these encounters in my fieldwork diaries, and my process of writing emotions in, and out, of the research encounter and in my doctoral thesis.

Emotion, Affect, Method

Before I began my research, in 2011, a forum featuring several prominent feminist IR scholars interrogated ‘the question of *whether* and *how* emotions should enter our scholarship’ (Sylvester et al. 2011, 687). While feminist scholars have long advocated for emotions to be taken seriously as constitutive of the political, social, and cultural world, the forum specifically sought to address the ways that emotion was still being written out of the research encounter. Sandra Marshall, a contributor to the forum, reflected on her feelings of ‘awe’ listening to these ‘super-human’ feminist researchers who were able to speak of their experiences with ‘unwavering composure’ (Ibid., 688–9). Later, on reflection, ‘feminist alarm-bells . . . started ringing’. Exploring a ‘culture of silence’ surrounding researchers’ emotions within the discipline (Ibid., 689), Marshall sought to ‘uncover some of the untold stories’ about emotion (here, specifically trauma) in feminist international relations research (Ibid., 690). This forum, and feminist and critical methodological interventions, especially those that emphasised the personal, the emotional, and the

affective (e.g. Daigle 2015; Dauphinée 2007), as well as the inherent relationality of the research encounter (Stern 2005), were instrumental as I prepared for my fieldwork. These texts provided key insights into the way that emotion and affect, both my own and those of my participants, would structure my research and its frames of recognition. Coming to fieldwork prepared for emotions to enter my research, I nevertheless found myself unprepared for precisely how and to what extent.

The term productive affective failure is inspired by the broader literature on affect and failure in feminist international relations research. It draws specifically on the concept of 'affective dissonance', applying this to specific moments of fieldwork failure. Linda Åhäll and Clare Hemmings both frame affective dissonance as a starting point for feminist inquiry. For Hemmings (2012, 154), this concept of affective dissonance is proposed as a 'critique of empathy as the basis of an affective feminist solidarity'. Grounding through a narration of her process of becoming a feminist, affective dissonance is a process of identity formation which arises from a dissonance between a 'sense of self and the possibilities for its expression and validation'. This is a basis for – though does not necessarily always lead to – 'a connection to others', a 'desire for transformation', and forms of solidarity which are nevertheless 'thoroughly cognisant of power and privilege' (Ibid.). My reading is closer to Åhäll's (2018, 44) reformulation which pinpoints the concept as a 'methodological tool for analyses of the politics of emotion more broadly'. Putting affective dissonance to work in research, and in fieldwork specifically, entails an openness to being transformed in the research encounter in ways that generate new insights and embodied knowledge that would not have otherwise been possible.

I focus here on instances of affective dissonance that nevertheless, at the time, felt like failure. Laura Sjoberg's reflections on failure and critique in critical security studies are instructive. Contending that 'failure should be recognised and embraced rather than ignored, covered up, or compensated for' (2019, 77), Sjoberg situates failure as a 'crucial part of the practice of critique rather than a shameful secret and an embarrassing shortcoming' (Ibid., 89). The term failure is then used deliberately. The affective responses discussed – tears and laughter – can be understood as failure to the extent that they run contra to myths of an unencumbered, unemotional researcher. Further, in context, they were affective responses that were unexpected, even inappropriate. However, and importantly, even as they structured what I knew and wrote about the frames of post-conflict justice in BiH, in the process of writing, I often obscured these affective responses from the research encounter. Productive affective failure can be understood as a subset of affective dissonance. The term helps me to examine the paradoxical nature of research encounters that seem like failure, while nevertheless becoming central to a renewed knowledge of oneself in the research context. During my research, there were likely other instances of affective failure that I have forgotten or perhaps did not even register at the time. Here, I choose to concentrate on affective failures – tears and laughter – that produced insights for my research and instances where this failure seemed to facilitate further understanding, if not connection to those with whom I spoke.

Before turning to tears and laughter, it is worth briefly outlining some practicalities of the research approach. The oft-cited, and sometimes palpable 'research fatigue' in BiH,[1] impacted the way that I engaged with research participants (Clark 2008). Those with whom I spoke had varying expectations of interviews, yet, almost all were used to speaking with researchers and journalists. Though coming to interviews with a commitment to narrative research, it was often difficult to discuss issues which deviated from publicly available materials. Given this, I adopted an approach to interviews that I describe as (semi)unstructured. Coming to interviews prepared with topics and questions and sending these to participants where they were requested, I nevertheless emphasised my interest in them as people – attending to the specificities of their role and their thoughts about the topics of discussion. I tried to curate a sense of familiarity by sharing my own thoughts and experiences. For example, I often drew comparisons with the UK context, highlighting key issues and limitations in policy and practice with regard to relevant aspects of gender and welfare. Both interviews discussed took this tack, with varying degrees of success and, indeed, failure. All participants were given the option of conducting interviews in English or Bosnian. For interviews conducted in Bosnian, I worked with a trusted translator who had experience with the questions that informed the research. Interviews discussed in the section on tears were conducted in English since the psychotherapist had a good working knowledge of English, while the interview discussed in the second on laughter with the representatives of Žene žrtve rata was conducted in Bosnian. Working with a translator enabled insight into the nuances of language and expression that would have otherwise been missed, yet, it also created a sense of distance between myself and those of whom I was asking questions. Indeed, it was a contributing factor to the intersections of failure and

(dis)connection that are discussed in this chapter.

Tears: On the Couch at Vive Žene

Vive žene was founded in 1994 with the support of a women's group in Dortmund, Germany in response to the violence that accompanied the war. The organisation aimed to provide ongoing support and psychosocial care to women and children who had experienced a range of war-related violence, including torture, displacement, and sexual violence. Over the course of 25 years the organisation has built on this work, while adapting to a changing post-war context. Continuing to work with victims of war-related violence and displaced communities, they have expanded their remit to include other forms of violence. Drawing on this experience, the organisation actively works within the post-conflict and transitional justice context, providing training to legal professionals and other non-governmental organisations and conducting advocacy work related to the individuals and communities that they work with.

Over the course of my fieldwork, I met with a psychotherapist working for Vive žene on two occasions – in April and October 2015. On both occasions, I travelled to meet her at their office in Tuzla. Both conversations took place in the bright and airy therapeutic rooms in the building, putting me at ease almost instantly. Our first conversation was informative, centring on the organisation's work with victims of war-related violence and its psychosocial approach. Our second conversation was more focused. In the preceding months, I had come to reflect on the intersecting layers of post-conflict justice. I noted the way that the therapeutic relationship and the language of psychological recognition were deployed within legal-bureaucratic frames of justice. Resonating with conceptual discussions on the (dis)connections between trauma, truth-telling, catharsis, and the law (e.g. Minow 1998; Moon 2009), I began to map this intersection empirically. I became interested in understanding how psychosocial organisations negotiated these in their work, asking questions about the psychological preparation of witnesses for war crimes trials.

During the second interview, we came to this topic through a broader discussion about the role of the therapeutic encounter in facilitating clients to speak about traumatic experiences. Talking, remembering, naming and listening was 'part of the process . . . [of] "healing for trauma", but the psychotherapist emphasised that this might also 'be preparation for witnessing'. A much,

[S]maller number . . . of our clients, they decide after psychotherapy to become a witness […]. And for witnesses especially, it is very important to go through psychotherapy. To become more stable, to really have the feeling that you are in control. That you know everything that has happened.

(Anonymised, 2015a)

Continuing, the psychotherapist explained that it was their role 'to go with the clients to be there, to prepare them, but not then go in the court and be a witness'. Briefly interjecting, I asked whether it was common for those working in the organisation to be called as expert witnesses during war crimes trials.

Psychotherapist: No, it was sometimes. It was when they were judging persons like Biljana Plavšić[2], when there was some person, and they needed some proof that really things have happened. And so, they were gathering all sorts of experts . . . What was happening and what were the consequences for the clients?

Author: But that only happens in specific cases when they're trying to establish a wider picture – so perhaps expert witnesses would be required for someone who was higher up the chain of command […]. But in a more localised sense, it would just be enough for witnesses to be called for people who experienced violence.

Psychotherapist: Yes, yes.

Author: Sorry, this is always such a heavy topic to discuss.

Psychotherapist: Yes.

[Silence]

Author: Yes, sorry.

Psychotherapist: You are crying, why? How does that affect you? What's happening?

Author: It's okay, I'm okay.

Psychotherapist: But why are you crying?

Author: I think sometimes it just quite overwhelming to speak about. I'll be okay.

Psychotherapist: Okay.

Author: Maybe we can try a different question.

(Ibid.)

The recording of the interview continues for around ten minutes, during which the psychotherapist and I discussed several other topics including her opinions of a prominent feminist truth-telling process coordinated by Žene u crnom (Women in Black). With the interview coming to a natural pause, I turned off the Dictaphone. At this point, the psychotherapist again expressed her concern. Offering to make coffee, we continued to talk.

In my fieldwork notes after the interview, I wrote at length in an attempt to process what had happened.

13 October 2015

I just had a meeting [with the psychotherapist] which was quite uncomfortable. At some point in the interview I felt the need to cry. I think [the psychotherapist] located this in some trauma I have. I'm not sure if I have a trauma […] our conversation today seemed to transcend the researcher-researched boundary. When I was upset, she asked me what was wrong; did I have some connection to Bosnia? Was it something about the Court process? I replied that I was tired […] a lot of [this research is …] emotionally hard work. I forgot what we talked about when I turned off the recorder.

Further, and actively reflecting on how and whether I would write this into the research encounter, I wrote:

[W]ill I write about this? Should I write about how [it] interrupted for a moment the way the interview went. She became and was reinforced as therapist. She asked me questions and made me coffee. How did it feel to be her patient?

The interpretation of the interview in the final version of the thesis was more muted. Though the interview is subject to discussion, my reflections on the tears were confined to the margins. The interview is mentioned in the introduction within a discussion of methodology and co-production of narrative during interviews. Particularly, I discuss my approach to follow-up interviews where I made space for 'participants to respond to, push back against, and develop' my interpretation of our previous discussions (Cole 2018, 25). I re-approached these conversations with the psychotherapist more directly in the conclusion, reflecting that I had come 'to empathise strongly with the complex negotiations that psychological professionals made regarding the post-conflict justice context'. Describing the intersubjectivity of the encounter, and placing this in a broader context of post-conflict psychological recognition I wrote that,

[T]his empathic relation was not unidirectional. In this context, my questions regarding the subject of wartime sexual violence were often turned back toward me. Throughout the interview, and beyond the context of my research statement, the psychotherapist wanted to know what my interest in the topic was, and in what ways did it affect me.

During this interview, as we continued to talk about the work of the organisation, the power relations in the conversation were ever-shifting. As I came to recognise the negotiations that the psychotherapist made through her work with clients, I was placed 'on the couch', layers of psychic and social recognition moving between us in the encounter.

(Ibid., 277)

The interview was key to my reading of psychosocial organisations within the contemporary post-conflict justice context, with several identifiable and structuring effects on my research. First, it prompted an examination of trauma which moved beyond Foucauldian-inspired IR literature that explores how it is mobilised as a tool of governance (Howell 2011; Pupavac 2001). Unsettled by the feeling of connection to the psychotherapist, I was compelled to write in a way that conveyed the affective complexity within the encounter and in a manner that better reflected the way that organisations like Vive žene mediate the relationship between the psychological and the legal for their clients. Second, and perhaps paradoxically, my reaction of tears within the interview inaugurated a re-examination of the difficulties inherent in speaking about trauma. In my (very limited) experience of being placed on the couch, I had resisted the attempt to pinpoint my tears in a categorical or defined manner. This experience – though clearly irreducible to those who have experienced war-related harms – nevertheless enabled an embodied insight into the possibilities, limitations, and (potential) violences of narrating trauma through the various structuring frames of post-conflict recognition. These insights were invaluable as I examined the role of testimony and witnessing in post-conflict recognition. The next section reflects further on witnessing and mis/recognition, discussing laughter during an interview with two representatives of a Sarajevo-based survivor association.

Laughter and Mis/Recognition

In November 2015, I conducted an interview with two representatives from Žene žrtve rata. Founded in 2003, two years after the first successful prosecutions of rape as a crime against humanity in the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia in the Foća trial (Helms 2013, 197), the organisation aimed to offer support and aid to survivors. Since then, the organisation's director Bakira Hasečić had become a highly visible and vocal figure, both within BiH and internationally. Positioned as a public advocate for survivors of wartime sexual violence, Hasečić and the organisation more broadly have become known for their work facilitating the prosecution of war crimes (Ibid., 213). When I met with the representatives, I hoped to gain a better understanding of their role with regard to the various legal and bureaucratic institutions which pursue war crimes prosecutions. In my preparatory notes, I wrote that the 'association gathers evidence and information about war crimes […] with a view to prosecution' and that the organisation had previously 'provided key testimony in rape and sexual abuse trials' and had 'helped obtain justice – financial and psychological for many of its […] members'. Reframing these notes for the interview, I noted the following guiding questions:

- In what ways are you able to help members of the organisation obtain justice?
- Have you been satisfied with court processes to date?
- What more could be done for women victims of war?

When I arrived at the office – located at the bottom of a residential building in Sarajevo – it became clear that I had come at a difficult time. Joined a few moments later by my translator, we were asked to take a seat and wait. Soon after, we were called through to one of the rooms at the back of the office. As we sat down, one of the representatives intimated that the identity of a protected witness had been revealed.

Despite this, the interview began quickly. Crowded around a small table in the office, the representatives seemed keen to tell me about the current work of the organisation, including the publication of a monograph which detailed the extent of wartime sexual violence. The long informational statements given by the representatives took some time to translate. During this process, both representatives left to take a phone call. After a brief intermission, one of the representatives returned and recommenced the interview. Despite the confusion that seemed to dwell in the gaps in conversation, the first part of the interview covered much ground in terms of the organisation's commitment to 'break the silence' surrounding wartime sexual violence in BiH. As the interview progressed, I attempted to direct

conversation toward other aspects of post-conflict support and recognition. In doing so, I hoped to prompt further reflection on their positioning with regard to the frames of post-conflict recognition that I was beginning to identify.

At this point, both representatives had returned to the room. While the first representative remained seated around the table with the translator and I, the second representative had positioned herself outside of this circle behind a desk near the office window. Adjusting to the new dynamics of the room, I asked:

Author: So […] we've spoken quite a lot about the ways in which you help women achieve justice and some of the psychological support. But it also mentioned on your website that you also help with economic issues of women. And I was wondering whether this was to do with the civilian status of war category? […] Or whether it extended beyond that?

Representative 1: When it comes to the economic support of women, it is also conducted through different projects. So, it all depends on the availability of projects and different propositions where we can supply with the projects. And when it comes to the status of civilian war victims, it has been introduced to the law, and I think at this point they receive 586 marks per month. Is this it?

Author: So, maybe we can return a little bit to the book. Is that okay?

Representative 1: I don't know what, [Anonymised] has suggested she has been working on, and so…

Author: I just…

Representative 2: We have given you the brochure and I think it is enough for your project. You have everything in that – all the information.

Translator: So, I think we're done.

Author: Okay, I think that's it. Okay. Thank you.

Representative 2: Were you laughing?

Translator: They think we were smiling. But I didn't…

Representative 2: We have given you enough information. And you have all the information in the brochure. … Because this is not the first time that we helped the students who worked on their thesis.

Author: Okay.

Representative 2: And we're always available for it.

Author: Great, thank you very much.

(Anonymised 2015b)

Reconstructing from fieldwork diary notes and my recollections of the incident, the recording of the interview ends abruptly, and the translator and I are shuffled out of the office. Yet, the conversation did not end there. With the second representative acknowledging a shift in tone, the tension in the room all but dissipated. As we clutched jackets and bags, the second representative addressed me again. Expressing regret for the way the conversation ended, she intimated a lack of trust in researchers: though many came to do interviews with the organisation, this rarely translated into outcomes. It neither changed the position of survivors in BiH, nor gave the organisation anything tangible to build into their advocacy work. After the interview, the translator and I wandered slowly back to the city to process the encounter.

This interview underlines a more fundamental disconnect between the representatives and me, in my role as researcher. The representative's accusation of misrecognition – through a smile or laughter – reveals important complexities in terms of witnessing in the aftermath of harm. Though from the outset, the representatives were clear about their desire to 'break the silence' around wartime sexual violence, this was not all that I was called to account for in our further conversation. Disconnection opened space for the representatives to return my questioning. Elaborating on past experiences speaking with students, researchers, and journalists, she intimated that they were tired of answering the same questions. In doing so, she called me to account for a longer trajectory of extractive knowledge production. Interrogating me in my position as researcher, the representatives wanted to know how *this* interview and *this* research project could be any different. In the context of my thinking on testimony and witness, this encounter prompted reflection on the multiple and intersecting forms of harm that those affected by war-related violence might call researchers to account for. Specifically, these harms were not temporally defined by war or conflict; rather, they evolved and took on new meanings over time and through encounter. Laughter, as well as a process of dwelling on the affective elements within the disconnect, opened a means through which to explore the ambiguities of recognition for the subject of wartime sexual violence; and prompted further examination of my complicity in the reproduction of post-conflict harms.

Conclusion: Taking Note of Affective Failure

This chapter put into focus two instances of fieldwork failure, engendering discussion of its productive elements. While instances of tears and laughter provoked differing responses and feelings of dis/connection, they are drawn together to demonstrate how affective failure, and its subsequent reflection, can lead to a transformed, embodied knowledge of the research context; in this case post-conflict recognition in BiH. Interviews with the psychotherapist at Vive žene revealed a complex negotiation of psychosocial recognition across therapeutic and legal contexts. Tears disrupted power relations within the encounter, with the psychotherapist placing me 'on the couch'. While bringing to the fore an embodied (if still limited) understanding of the limitations and potential violences of the expectations and frames surrounding the narration of trauma, my feelings of dis/connection also prompted a more sympathetic reading of the psychotherapist's position. The encounter at Žene žrtve rata similarly revealed a complex interplay between forms of recognition. Laughter was disruptive to the extent that it enabled the representatives to ask questions of me, holding me to account in my position as researcher. The accusation of laughter, along with subsequent discussions, enabled an embodied reflection on both my preconceptions of what it meant to bear witness in the aftermath of war-related harm and my own potential for complicity in the reproduction of this harm. Tears and laughter can be understood as prompts toward introspection on the role of power, positionality, and hierarchy within fieldwork; specifically, in the context of post-conflict recognition. However, to be a productive force in the context of research, this process of introspection must be learned from and put to use. In the context of my research, affective failure enabled a more reflexive approach to unfolding the multiple inflections of recognition in the context of post-conflict justice processes in BiH, and one which was more attuned to the complexities of power and vulnerability within encounters.

Affective failure is bound to happen during research. Contra to the myth of the encumbered, non-emotional researcher, a plethora of affective responses – both conscious and unconscious – enter our research frames. Feminist, critical, and ethnographic-style research tends to open up these questions of emotion, affect, and response. Taking seriously aspects of body language, relationships with research participants and translators, feelings of dis/connection, and reflections on positionality and hierarchy, these concerns are placed at the centre of the research. This chapter cannot tell you precisely how or to what extent affect and failure will enter your research. However, it might reassure you to know that affective failure is not a failure of research practice. Rather, it is another potential site for learning and unlearning our preconceptions, experiences, and training. And an important part of the process of continued reflection on our topics of research and of ourselves.

Notes

[1] In my wider research, this was an important factor that was brought to bear on the analysis of the frames of post-conflict recognition.

[2] Plavšić served as a member of the acting Presidency of the so-called "Serbian Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina" (later Republika Srpska). In 2001, she was indicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) for genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity. Plavšić later pleaded guilty to persecutions, a crime against humanity, and was sentenced to 11 years' imprisonment (see Plavšić (IT-00-39 and 40/1)).

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