RESEARCH ARTICLE

Negotiating Unfreedom: An (Auto-) Ethnography of Life at the Forefront of Academic Knowledge Production

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the negotiated and contingent nature of research access and limitations in a cooperative research project in Kyrgyzstan, Central Asia. It argues that even technically and legally 'free' academic research is often subject to influence and restrictions emanating from the politicization of research at the frontiers of the global political economy of academic knowledge production. The article sheds light on the frontier status of knowledge production in Kyrgyzstan, where recent revolutions and social conflict have created a tense climate amidst authorities' attempts to reassert their epistemic dominance. The analysis shows, first, how state actors' measures to curb foreign research activity affect attempts to do research with national and international (non-governmental) organizations and networks; second, how members of such entities realize research cooperation or hamper it in various ways; and third, how different emotional and psychological factors affect the negotiation of access and the shaping of research cooperation.

KEYWORDS: Knowledge Production, Fieldwork, Methodology, Access Restrictions, Practice-Based Research

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1. Introduction

Current dynamics in world politics make it abundantly clear that theory and knowledge are not value-free but, as in the Coxian *dictum*, 'always for someone and for some purpose'. The validity of any theory or facts appears to depend more and more on one's standpoint and political or identity affiliation. If proponents of a liberal-democratic world order appeared to have a point in the early 1990s given the collapse of the Soviet bloc and democratic openings following it, their theses on transition and democratization, and the intervention and conditionality policies they legitimised have come under increasing attack. Different commentators have observed that the assertion of subjectivity – national, cultural, individual or otherwise – in debates on knowledge, facticity and 'truth', has entered political discourse and brought about a situation in which the representation, and sometimes even the very reality, of certain events and facts is heavily contested. What are the implications of this seemingly unprecedented 'post-truth' epoch (Tallis 2016), in which ideas about political change, national development and conflict appear ever more contested? In particular, how do people make sense of, and react to, framings and narratives they find disagreeable, super-imposed and epistemically violent?

In this contribution, I show how contestations around the validity and truth-value of knowledge – academic or otherwise – can materialize in frictions, disapproval and rejection of researchers' attempts to do empirical fieldwork. I thus aim to demonstrate that academic freedom – understood as the freedom to conduct and publish research on the topics and with the methods one desires – is not only a legal, logistical and technical matter – such as gaining ethics board approval, security clearance and research permits or visas. Rather, the form and content of social research is continuously negotiated and shaped by researchers and research participants. Drawing inspiration from feminist scholarship's argument that research is necessarily 'situated' and bounded in its attempt to produce knowledge, I propose the idea of negotiating the 'unfreedom' of research as a critical vantage point for reflection on the politicization and corresponding restriction of academic research in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia, but also other geopolitically contested places.

As other authors have shown, in the Central Asian context (Adams 1999; Reeves 2005; Wilkinson 2008) and beyond, research is susceptible to various forms of subtle and indirect influence and restrictions, which take shape primarily in participant-researcher relations. Apart from the institutional, political and economic dimensions of academic freedom, it can thus be argued that the 'everyday politics' of research and the emotional, psychological and inter-subjective realms require attention and reflection as to how they facilitate or limit possibilities of doing research. Different debates on fieldwork methodology (Wall & Mollinga 2008; Sriram et al. 2009) and research in '(semi-) authoritarian' and 'closed contexts' (Area 2013; SSQ 2016) have discussed the ethical, methodological and strategic questions arising from scholars' forays into 'danger' or 'frontier zones'. Based on these discussions, I show how I attempted to mitigate the difficulties arising from inappropriate research questions and framings in my research project on community security and peace-building practices (see Lottholz 2017, p. 17 ff.). By describing how I encountered difficulties, obstacles and tensions despite my attempts to do more context-sensitive research, I demonstrate how knowledge production needs to be negotiated by anyone doing field research on politically salient topics in a geopolitically contested region.

My analysis is based on six months of fieldwork in the Kyrgyz Republic. Deemed the most open of the five post-Soviet Central Asian republics, the country has undergone comprehensive reforms and experienced two revolutions in 2005 and 2010, causing widespread disillusion with the liberal-democratic capitalist model and socio-economic and identitarian tensions that culminated in inter-communal clashes in the southern part in 2010. Correspondingly, Kyrgyzstan's development and international integration have been thoroughly contested, with the government and elites trying to reassert room for manoeuvring and independence from both international and domestic interference (Gullette & Heathershaw 2015). The corresponding politicization, especially of international presence, in the country's public discourse has palpable effects on the lives of people, and especially on attempts to do field research as a foreign scholar (Bekmurzaev et al. forthcoming).

My (auto-) ethnography[1] of obstacles encountered in trying to get access to organisations and individuals is focused on two aspects. First, I trace how the 'affective politics of sovereignty' (Gullette & Heathershaw 2015) played out in the cooperative research projects I arranged, as different members of the networks and organizations I worked with either participated or abstained from doing so to varying degrees and in diverse ways. Secondly, I analyze the influence of emotions and psychological factors experienced by myself and my social environment to demonstrate which actions, tactics and narratives people employed in their efforts to manage an uncertain and sometimes clearly insecure situation. By embedding this retrospective of my fieldwork into nuanced and critical debates on politics in Kyrgyzstan (Reeves 2005; Wilkinson 2008; Megoran 2013; Gullette & Heathershaw 2015), along with critical perspectives on the global political economy of academic knowledge production (Paasi 2015; Bliesemann de Guevara & Kostic 2017) and its Central Asian frontier (Amsler 2007; Heathershaw & Megoran 2011; Lewis 2017), I aim to show how, even if technically and legally 'free', academic research needs to negotiate and reassert this status in its every step, and may still be limited and skewed.

This argument is neither particularly new, nor does it only apply to Central Asia. There is a vast literature on issues of access and (non-) participation in fieldwork-based qualitative research (e.g. de Laine 2000; Feldman et al. 2003, pp. 53 ff.) and more recent works that show how the negotiation of access stands in a difficult relation to questions of informed consent and ethics (Mckenzie 2009; Calvey 2017). This article contributes to such debates by shedding light on the way in which people in Kyrgyzstan choose to participate, or not, in research against the background of recent violent conflict and political contestations over its representation and interpretation.

In the next section, I briefly elaborate the concept of global political economy of knowledge production and its implications for working at its peripheral frontiers; i.e. the resistance and 'politics of sovereignty' field researchers may en-

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[1] (Auto-) ethnography here denotes the description of both the behaviour of people surrounding the researcher and the researcher's own role(s).

counter. In section three, I show how I tried to avoid the politicization of my own research by framing it in a nuanced way and approaching it in a cooperative, dialogical manner that focuses on people's own viewpoints and practices. In section four, I analyze the limitations and problems I encountered in cooperating with different organisations, which ranged from invocation of bureaucratic or explicit security or organizational integrity reasons to issues of apparent personal incapability. In section five, I provide insights into everyday encounters and situations indicating the psychological conditions and emotional challenges that research participants, myself, and the social environment were affected by and which arguably influenced my fieldwork, the material gathered and conclusions drawn from it. In the conclusion, I link these findings into the overall argument that, even though it might not be explicitly under threat or limited, academic freedom requires constant negotiation, navigation and enactment by researchers and participants.

2. The global political economy of knowledge production and its frontier in Kyrgyzstan

The difficulties and dangers researchers face in certain contexts should not be normalized as something completely external to the activity of researchers themselves. Rather than seeing danger and risk as something entirely seated in the local context, it is necessary to critically reflect on how non-engagement in research projects, whether in the form of polite abstention, passive introversion or open hostilities (see below in more detail), may be rooted in past experiences of interaction with foreigners and foreign researchers, specifically. Critical contributions to the political economy of knowledge production literature have pointed out how scholars may at least serve to reproduce this constellation, if not actively entrench it. Paasi (2015) has noted the unequal power relations between Western/Western-affiliated scholars and others (see also Tietze & Dick 2009), which are especially marked in the areas of peer-review publishing and competition in the job market in Western institutions, where non-Western scholars often stand little chance to attain the affiliation and institutional background enjoyed by their Western (-educated) counterparts.

Overall, this literature (see also Amsler 2007) points out that the mechanisms of re-cruitment and institutional reproduction in academia are still skewed towards white Western and more affluent people, which limits the scope of academic research to produce socially representative knowledge.

Similarly, a recent exchange on knowledge production in peace, conflict and intervention studies (JISB 2017) has elucidated the limitations and risks faced by researchers in this field. Given the rise of social media and new communication technology, Bliesemann de Guevara and Kostic observe an 'increased competition over the authority to speak, framings of conflict situations, interpretations of the causes and nature of political problems, and not least policy solutions. [...] To be successful in winning the battles of ideas, knowledge producers have to plug into prevalent global norms, such as human rights or just peace, because such norms provide a globalized blueprint for what is deemed legitimate political action at a given time and in a given setting' (2017, p. 6).

In this sense, given that Western governments' and donor money still dic-tate agendas in development, peace and security policies, scholars feel increasingly pressed to formulate their research in established ideational frameworks and global norms without questioning the implications. In the 'neoliberal market place of ideas' (ibid., p. 11), competition is fierce, but also, as Lewis finds, Western governments and agencies in fact constitute a 'monopsony' (i.e. a single demand for knowledge), that makes academic knowledge production conform to the liberal and democratic norms and discourses promoted by these actors (2017, p. 23). The dominant theo-ries and policy-making paradigms 'predetermine which questions are asked, what is seen as a relevant problem to be worked on or researched into, and which methods and approaches are most useful to do so' (Bliesemann de Guevara & Kostic 2017, p. 8).

The effects of this political economy of knowledge production are espe-cially palpable in Central Asia. Although the framing of the region as unstable and hotbed of extremism has been challenged on different occasions (Heathershaw & Megoran 2011; Heathershaw & Montgomery 2014), many research grants are se-

cured and outputs published on issues that are related to conflict, violence and corruption. Analyses of the multi-ethnic landscape of the Fergana valley and its neighbouring states as prone to conflict, often appear to primarily justify conflict prevention and social intervention programmes (Reeves 2005, p. 73). This critique of simplistic and insufficiently backed-up portrayals is also taken up by political actors and authorities in Central Asian countries, perhaps most prominently in Kyrgyzstan. In June 2010, inter-communal clashes in the South of the country wreaked damage to over 1,700 properties, left almost 500 dead and made up to 400,000 (temporarily) flee their homes (Megoran et al. 2014). In the aftermath of these 'June events', major contestations revolved around the nature, reasons and possible consequences of the conflict. The findings of an International Inquiry Commission, that the conflict was largely among ethnic lines and led to the disproportionate violation of the Uzbek minority's human rights (Megoran et al. 2014, p. 2 ff.), was rejected by the government. On the contrary, representatives of the latter argued that the deficiencies and 'inadequately balanced approach [of the report]… may negatively influence the situation in Kyrgyzstan, and that the differing parties may be provoked by dissatisfaction caused by the insufficient completeness and objectivity of the investigations' (cited in Wilkinson 2015, p. 428).

The dismissal of the results of the Commission was followed by a government-commissioned report that identified – but did not prove – possible links between activities of radical Islamic groupings and the 'June events' (ibid.). The Kyrgyz government took further measures and revoked the permission to reside in the country for the chair of the Commission Kimo Kiljunen (ibid., p. 430). This re-assertion of national and security interests against international actors through an 'affective politics of sovereignty' was not confined to single high-profile cases but mirrored a general popular sentiment. Gullette and Heathershaw have analysed how demonstrators in the capital Bishkek decidedly rejected the idea of an OSCE police mission, seen as an expression of Western interference into affairs which the country was to handle itself, as they propagated 'Say No to a 'Kyrgyz Kosovo!' (2015, p. 134).

In the following years, the sentiment that Kyrgyzstan needs to be protected from research and policies that can aggravate tensions and conflict, spread from institutional cooperation towards NGO projects and research into issues of human rights and interethnic relations, where a new discursive 'conflict-prevention' was enacted by different state and non-/semi-state actors. In September 2014, for instance, the international NGO Freedom House and its Kyrgyzstani partner Advocacy Centre for Human Rights were confronted with a criminal investigation into their pilot survey project on interethnic relations in southern Kyrgyztsan which, according to the State Committee for National Security (GKNB),[2] could potentially have led to 'interethnic discord' (Beishenbek kyzy 2014). The head of the State Agency for Local Self-Governance and Interethnic Relations (GAMSUMO) commented that Freedom House was 'making use of their financial means … to again pick up on sore issues' and that 'not every NGO can do everything that they come up with and send that kind of reports which their principals want to see' (quoted in ibid.).

Other, more low-profile cases include the detention and deportation of the US-Pakistani journalist Umar Farooq in March 2015 in Osh on allegations that he was carrying 'extremist material'; and of the journalist Frederik Faust from Danish Church Aid (March 2014) and ICG analyst Conor Prasad (November 2012), who were detained and interrogated for their investigation into the Uzbek community's views on possible rights violations and the possible provocation of interethnic unrest implied by the local GKNB branch (Mets 2015). Although the charges were dropped in all these cases (ibid.), this demonstrates how sub-national political actors are ready to reassert state security interests against foreign researchers supposedly intruding into domestic affairs. This 'politics of sovereignty' establishes a frontier of knowledge production, where international and largely Western perspectives, emphasizing the continued discrimination and marginalization of the Uzbek minority (e.g. Megoran et al. 2014; Bennett 2016), clash with the standpoint of the national

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[2] *Gosudarstvennyi komitet natsionalnoi bezopasnosti.*

authorities and loyal Uzbek elites that these issues are negligible or insignificant (see Beishenbek kyzy 2014).

These cases send the clear message to social researchers, especially those inquiring questions about peace, conflict and security in the country (including myself), that if they inquire into interethnic relations, human rights or violent extremism, they can be held liable for the same reasons (Bekmurzaev et al. forthcoming). On the other hand, as shown above, the global political economy of knowledge production privileges research that is framed in these very terms. This situation renders researchers' working the field radically uncertain and precarious. Formally covered by their university ethics board and their affiliation with a local research institution, there is little to stop local security services from detaining and interrogating scholars inquiring issues that are of relevance for national security. In the following section, I show how a practice-based and cooperative approach to research can help to overcome the dilemmas researchers face in navigating this frontier of knowledge production.

3. Avoiding risk? Appropriate framing and a practice-based, cooperative research approach

While often not clearly visible or palpable, the backlash and restrictions faced by journalists and researchers in Kyrgyzstan create a situation of thorough uncertainty, as to whether one's research breaches the interests of national security and interethnic unity (or authorities' interpretation thereof). This creates a sense of necessity to tone down or re-frame research in order to avoid confrontation with security organs and to not make research participants feel vulnerable. Especially recent proposals on researching authoritarian and nationalist regimes 'from the ground floor' (SSQ 2016) raise the inevitable question: Is there any scope for researchers doing such research to be open and honest about the overarching framing and interest of their research? Contributions to this debate seem to answer this in the negative. Suggestions range from 're-framing' research (Loyle 2016, p. 930), to devising 'opening narratives' that 'put interviewees at ease' (Markowitz 2016, p.

903), towards generally 'flexible' communication about one's research (Malekzadeh 2016, p. 864). It can be argued that, in fact, this 'bending' and flexibilization of research *vis-à-vis* participants and gatekeepers presents the application of covert research techniques. As Calvey (2017, pp. 151 ff.) has noted, covert elements are pervasive but also necessary to enable most social research in the first place (see also Mckenzie 2009, 5.6). In this light, and given the intrusive and monopolizing tendencies of security and law enforcement institutions in Kyrgyzstan, a careful way of framing one's research questions and overarching interest also appears reasonable for the purpose of mitigating the risks faced by researchers and research participants alike.

Against this background, I decided not to use the 'sore' and inappropriate terms and framings that had caused discontent with foreign researchers in recent years. Instead, I defined my main objective as understanding the reception and application of, but also resistance against, globally dominant notions of democratic governance and statebuilding in Kyrgyzstan, with a focus on the spheres of peacebuilding and community security (see Bekmurzaev et al. forthcoming). I approached organizations working in these areas and presented my research project information sheet and possible questions I would ask if they agreed to participate in the research. Instead of merely asking these organizations, both national and international NGOs working in Kyrgyzstan, for the semi-structured interviews usually employed in political and other social science research, I asked them if they were interested in cooperating for a longer period of time, during which I would accompany and analyse the projects they would give me access to. This was supposed to create a win-win situation, in which my partners would gain from the analysis and external point of view they received from me, while the decisive advantage for me was a better and more long-term insight into the implementation of projects rather than the impression of such processes as reported by representatives of these organizations (Lottholz 2017, p. 18).

This practice-based, cooperative approach has two main advantages: First, it helps to establish a common language with practitioners in NGOs in order to fol-

low, trace, contextualize and interpret their practices and provide feedback and re-flection which may be of value and help for them, making them more likely to ac-cept a cooperation and give the researcher first-hand access to their activities. Sec-ond, by focusing on practices themselves, instead of introducing certain framings into the research cooperation (e.g. about 'conflict', 'interethnic relations', 'transi-tional justice' etc.), I could mitigate concerns that cooperation with me could bring these organizations into trouble with law enforcement and security services. Rather than settling for one specific issue *a priori*, my more open focus on peacebuilding and community security practices shifted the spotlight to these organizations' and their local partners' attempts to provide a secure and peaceful environment in southern Kyrgyzstan (see Lottholz 2017, p. 18 ff. for more details).

Analytically, the advantage of a practice-based approach has been pointed out by Graef (2015). In his analysis of post-conflict community legal advice pro-grammes, he argues that following practices and their negotiation and constitution through the application of certain concepts and their translation into contextual vernaculars and institutional repertoires enables researchers to better grasp power relations and possibilities of emancipatory agency (2015, p. 6). Following earlier practice theory debates in political and social sciences (e.g. Schatzki 2002; Adler & Pouliot 2011), Büger proposes 'praxiography' as a distinct approach to the study of practices, where '"graphy" signifies the common task of describing, recording and writing about a distinct phenomenon, [and] in difference to ethnography, prax-iography is less interested in *ethno* (culture) but in *praxis* (practice)' (2014, p. 385, ital-ics in original). Through the right choice of practices examined and interpretative frameworks used to analyze them and their social effects, such ethnography of prac-tices can help to understand how the very categories, identities and concepts struc-turing social interaction in a given context are established and made to work in the first place (Lottholz 2017, p. 15). Such approach can foreground a critical analysis of, for instance, the difference between understandings of security or the Russian *bezopasnost* and the actions and effects they bring about in communities. In the case of Kyrgyzstan, Wilkinson (2008) has shown how a more people-centred version of

'safety' or 'human security' is often trumped by state security and sovereignty imperatives in the approaches and practices of security services and authorities more generally.

Such analysis has the potential to go beyond the unconstructive and already familiar criticism, through the dominant framings of human rights, authoritarianism and good governance (see section two) and to avoid the limitations and safety issues incurred by such a positioning. To do so, researchers need to sustain a dialogue with partners throughout the research cooperation, so as to gauge the degree of novelty, contribution and critical reflection the analysis can deliver towards practitioners' projects. While a practice-based and cooperative approach thus appears to mitigate a lot of the problems faced by researchers in 'closed' and '(semi-) authoritarian' contexts, I subsequently show how access regimes and security discourses in the field and corresponding emotional and psychological effects made this research a nevertheless difficult and constrained undertaking.

4. Negotiating access, cooperation and trust in peace and security research

In this section, I discuss the different limitations and problems I encountered in the attempt to realize the practice-based and cooperative approach at doing research on the reception of, and resistance towards, globally dominant governance and statebuilding norms by national and municipal actors. I show how I arranged cooperative research projects with three organizations; which access barriers and non-participation issues I faced within these entities; and the way in which they were justified with bureaucratic procedures, explicit security or organizational integrity reasons, or personal circumstances. With time and by networking my way from one organization to another, I was able to set up cooperation with one international NGO working on peacebuilding and security in Kyrgyzstan; a national level NGO network promoting an alternative conception to police reform, both through national level advocacy and municipal pilot project implementation; and a joint initiative of an intergovernmental organization and national NGO to build and strengthen the capacity of so-called territorial youth councils. The exact names and

locations of the organizations are anonymized, as they are not decisive for the theoretical and methodological insights emanating from this analysis.[3] The key finding from these experiences is that sooner or later I seemed to hit a glass wall in each of these organizations, albeit in different ways. As indicated earlier, while my analysis is focused on the context of contemporary Kyrgyzstan, many behaviours and expressions of consent or abstention are likely to be observed in any geographical and social or institutional context.

4.1. Case 1: Cooperation formalities in the security and crime prevention sector

In the case of the international NGO, which is renowned for its global work and well established in Kyrgyzstan, it was not hard to agree on a cooperation arrangement. This was mostly due to an interaction with the head of the organization's Central Asia office during an expert workshop in Bishkek, on which I presented my research project and informally exchanged anecdotes about my previous research experience in Kyrgyzstan. After a few more meetings, I was invited to work in the office of this organization, present my work to the staff and collaborate with them in analyzing the implementation of community security projects. Most importantly, I worked as assistant for a contracted consultant conducting profiling interviews with representatives of so-called Local Crime Prevention Centres (LCPCs or *Obshestvenno-profilakticheskie tsentry*) across the south of Kyrgyzstan. These centres had been established by the 2008 Law on Crime Prevention[4] to work as coordination bodies for already existing municipal and rural social institutions such as neighbourhood or *mahalla* committees, women's councils, youth councils, *aksakal* courts (courts of elders or literally 'white beards') and religious leaders (imams) (see Lottholz forthcoming). LCPCs are the local arm of the Ministry of Interior (MoI), which also oversaw the efforts of the international NGO and its national partner to enhance the LCPCs' capacity. The consultant's and my task was to simply ask the

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[3] For further details see Lottholz (2017) and Bekmurzaev et al. (forthcoming).
[4] Ru. *Zakon o profilaktike pravonarushenii*, available at: http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/1679. All translations from Russian, which was the general language of communication during research, are the author's.

workers and activists of these centres in different rural localities about their daily work, the kind of support they needed and any 'success stories'. The transcribed interviews were printed in a 'success stories' brochure that would be presented both to the MoI and other national and international partners and donors.

While I drew interesting insights into community security and crime prevention practices from this research (see Lottholz forthcoming), the terms of cooperation were not sustainable and soon let to its cooperation. This was primarily related to my in-between status of a foreign researcher affiliated with a research institute in Bishkek on the one hand, and a volunteer of the NGO who helped to conduct interviews for the profiles brochure, on the other. Given the less formal and supervised status of the profiling visits, this was not a problem. However, when it came to further interactions during which representatives of the national partner NGO and the MoI would be present, I was told that my attendance was not conducive or not desired at all. I thus was not given permission to attend trainings for newly included LCPCs or community events held by LCPCs as part of the programme. These events would have enabled me to further deepen and contextualize my research, which I ended up doing through follow-up visits, arranged privately on the basis of contacts gathered during the profiling visits (see Lottholz forthcoming).

Furthermore, I was told that even though the MoI had been informed about the profiling visits, some of the LCPCs were subsequently visited and queried, as to the content of our interaction by investigators of the State Committee for National Security (GKNB). This indicated that people are exposed to such 'control visits', even if interactions with external actors are supposedly agreed and under the roof of official cooperation between the MoI and well established international NGOs. This shows that, while it might strike researchers as surreal, there is a realistic possibility that organizations and individuals participating in social research are subsequently visited by security services and put in awkward or even dangerous situations. Reflecting on his research in Iran, Malekzadeh shows how he was increasingly confronted by 'paired government men' and became aware that people in his circles had informed on him (2016, pp. 867-868). The NGO I was cooperating with appar-

ently took a cautious approach when it came to avoiding encounters between me and their partners in the MoI, which, given the contestations around foreign researchers' activities in southern Kyrgyzstan, would undeniably have sparked interest – if not irritation – on part of the latter. Other factors limiting further cooperation with this NGO were internal disagreements and resistance towards my research, an issue I subsequently examine through the example of another cooperation.

4.2. Case 2: Negotiating access within a network promoting cooperative community security

Through the contacts I established with the latter international NGO, I got to know people working for a national NGO network promoting an 'Alternative conception for police reform', which included a more open and transparent assessment of police performance and a cooperative approach towards community security provision ('community policing'). Most relevant for my own research, in implementing this approach the networked tried to make law enforcement, local self-governance institutions, civil society and population cooperate in so-called community security working groups. My idea of doing an organizational ethnography of the work in the Bishkek headquarters and the implementation of the joint community security approach in pilot communities was greeted with equal openness in this organization and has led to a long-term cooperation (Lottholz 2017, p. 17 ff.).

My accompaniment of the members on their project implementation visits in the mostly remote communities was not only welcome because of the additional pair of helping hands always needed in such training, analysis and planning sessions. It also presented an additional motivation for the local working group members, as my research would show how – in the words of one of the headquarter members on a meeting in south-western Kyrgyzstan – they were 'building a decent country [*kak my ustroim normalnuiu stranu*]' (Bekmurzaev et al. forthcoming).

Still, whenever I tried to do research with constituent organizations and members of this network as part of my own research project, rather than as observer in their official project activities, I seemed to hit an invisible 'glass wall'. In the local crime prevention centre of one district of a large city in southern Kyr-

gyzstan, whose head was member of this police reform network, I was initially welcomed to attend the weekly planning meeting, where police, neighbourhood committee (*kvartalnyikomitet*) heads, elder courts and other actors discussed current issues of social order and crime prevention. Any further requests for their participation in my research were met with rejection or unreasonably superficial messages about 'everything going well' and the main thing being 'the health of our population'. Thus, my affiliation with the NGO's headquarters and the importance of the research for its goals – plus leaflets making abundantly clear what my research was about – were not sufficient to make the community security volunteers in this district develop enough trust to share their daily work experiences with me. It is not unlikely that this was due to the sensitive nature of any such conversations, given the significant way in which this district had been affected by the '2010 events'.

Another example for such intra-network non-participation was an ex-police staff and chair of a local security working group in a market town at the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan border, which was known to be affected by issues of religious and violent extremism that were also being discussed in the local working group. When I asked this person a second time about the possibility of attending working group meetings, they told me to clarify such questions with the head office: 'You see, I am a military person [*ia – chelovek voennyi*], I used to work in the police. Nurlan[5] is my boss; if he tells me something I will do it … so let him decide on this'. In a clarifying phone call with Nurlan, we agreed that perhaps the issues faced by this working group were indeed too sensitive to make them a case study for my PhD research. But rather than anticipating and systematically planning which groups would match the purpose of my accompanying research and which would not, this shows how I had to negotiate this boundary with people in the field and encountered the corresponding frictions and resistance, including queries as to whom I was working for and why exactly I was so interested in working group activities.

4.3. Case 3: Intra-institutional frictions in a youth volunteering initiative

[5] The headquarter staff running this project, all names used are pseudonyms.

The third cooperation was arranged with an initiative geared towards strengthening the so-called 'territorial youth councils', which, established after the '2010 events' with the intention to promote peace, tolerance and exchange among youth, had been institutionalized as part of the youth committee of the mayor's office in a city in southern Kyrgyzstan. Having been allowed to participate in a youth forum to get to know the project and its participants from different municipalities across the country, I was told by the implementing NGO that access to the project activities could only be granted by the youth committee of the local mayor's office. It required some efforts and networking to arrange to meet the committee's head and present an official letter with letterhead and written in the best official manner, asking 'for permission to conduct interviews and focus groups, during which I can ask those representatives who wish to take part in the research, questions on their work for the [youth councils]' '[i]n order to obtain a more holistic [*obshirnuiu*] picture of the [project]'. The spontaneous approval given by the committee head was a bureaucratic success.

It turned out, however, that this approval and access concession was not the key to exhaustive data gathering. Given that the committee head only briefly explained the reason, content and overarching framework of my research to other people in the initiative, the research objectives and purpose of interviews were not clear to the youth council representatives. I still had to do a lot of work to recruit the representatives and negotiate access to the events implemented by the youth councils. I did my best to explain my research project with a project information sheet, participant information sheet and informed consent forms for all participating youth council representatives. Reservations about my accommodation of this institution in a research project on statebuilding and norm adaptation after conflict were never voiced explicitly. But different behaviours and reactions, such as foot-dragging and piecemeal information, left me puzzled as to whether I was meeting covert resistance or if people were genuinely struggling to keep their promises. This was most starkly present in the behaviour of my 'contact person' Almaz, one of the

local youth council leaders with whom I had the following interactions over the course of the cooperative research (excerpt from field diary):

- Day 1: Almaz appointed by youth committee head to arrange interviews;
- Day 1 – 12 November: repeated emails and phone calls to discuss interview arrangements remain unanswered [remote communication while in another field site];
- Day 13 (International Youth Day celebration event planned): Almaz calls and confirms that celebration will take place in park A on the same day;
- Day 13, 3 pm: I am in park A and no event activities are to be seen; I get another call from Almaz telling me that the event is in park B;
- Around the place where Almaz said park B should be located no one has heard of this place; I call Almaz again, who excuses the confusion and says he is not local but a student from the province, he tells me to come to park C which is close by;
- 4 pm: I attend the International Youth Day celebration in park C;
- 5.30 pm: We walk back to town from the celebration and Almaz promises to arrange interviews and that I can come to the meeting of all youth council leaders the next day;
- Day 14: Almaz tells me the youth council leader meeting is cancelled due to refurbishment of the youth committee office, he invites me to come the next day to meet people working in the office; he would himself be present after 1 pm due to university lectures;
- Day 15: Almaz tells me that the refurbishment has not finished and I can take care of my other projects; when I insist on visiting the office to look for people he explains that he is in the countryside on a wedding, sends one contact of youth council leader for interview;
- At the youth committee office, I tell the committee head that the research is not going well due to communication problems; I'm appointed another contact person who arranges one interview for the same day and intro-

duces three more youth council leaders whom I interview/accompany to team meeting the next day;

- Day 16: Local district team meeting with one youth council and interviews with three more youth council leaders;

- Day 37 (after a break doing other research): 'Group interview' with team members of Almaz' youth council, two participants out of a dozen-strong team are present.

This protocol documents the difficulty of getting into contact with members of an institution whose head has granted access to the researcher but not clearly communicated the reason, content and status of the research within the entity. Moreover, it shows how one particular contact person within the institution is struggling to deliver on his supposed role (as it was communicated to me), and how a request for improvement *vis-à-vis* the committee head yielded more research access in the span of 24 hours than the 'contact person' managed to arrange during several days. As indicated, a possible reason is that Almaz was not originally from Osh but a university student from the province, which might have limited his ability to fully participate in the project and arrange research interactions as he was supposed to. Given his apparent awareness about these shortcomings, his half-hearted excuses and matter-of-fact reaction towards my request for helps with the committee head, it appears as if this reluctant cooperation was not entirely unintentional. As most of the youth council leaders did not really understand and support my research until I explained it during interviews, it makes sense that their 'contact person' was unsuccessful in arranging meetings with them or even 'fended off' my requests, given the additional labour and possible exposure it created for them.

The cooperative research projects discussed above are based on different authors' arguments that understanding and framing one's research within the paradigms of the 'bureaucratic-executive state' (Sheely 2016, p. 943) or of NGOs working in the field of conflict prevention, peace and security programming and agreeing on cooperation on mutually beneficial terms, can be helpful for doing legitimate research and gain access (Graef 2015; Bekmurzaev et al. 2017). Still, as I have shown,

this does not exempt researchers from confronting different access barriers and non-participation justified with bureaucratic procedures and formalities (e.g. a researcher's status and cooperation not being sufficiently formalized), or simply individual feelings of uncertainty about research and its implications, or people's inability or unwillingness to arrange research interactions. This crucial division between getting general physical access to an entity – based on gatekeepers' permission – and, on the other hand, actual 'social access' to the perspectives of the entity's members, has also been noted in Mckenzie's discussion of his research with spiritual organizations in Scotland (2009, 5.4) This varying degree of support from members of organizations and networks I worked with, determined the possibilities of doing research on certain topics while making it impossible in the case of others. In the next section, I provide more reflection on the emotional and psychological factors that appear to have entrenched the barriers I encountered during field research.

5. Emotional and psychological dimensions of field research: Precarious existence and cognitive dissonance

In this section I provide insights into everyday encounters and situations indicating the psychological conditions and emotional challenges that research participants, myself, and the social environment were affected by, and which arguably influenced the course of my fieldwork and the material gathered and conclusions drawn from it.

As regards the rejecting and generally hostile climate that is sometimes more, sometimes less palpable when doing research on conflict, peace and security issues in Kyrgyzstan, it is most important to understand that there is no accurate and widely shared understanding of social research in Kyrgyzstan or post-Soviet societies at large. While this is largely the case in Western countries as well (Calvey 2017, p. 5 ff.), social scientists face additional difficulty given the that in Soviet times research used to be an instrument of the state to survey the population and improve social policies and production processes, among other things (Amsler

2007, p. 30). Such activities were usually carried out in the form of 'social surveys' (*sotsopros*) by staff of the Academies of Sciences or universities catering to the state, which gives researchers an aura of being 'close to power'. An even more problematic association is the semantic proximity of the word 'research' (Ru. *issledovanie*) with the word 'investigation' (*rassledovanie*), as it is conducted by security and intelligence services.

The corresponding perception of researchers being dependent on certain institutions or actors and catering to external interests has not faded. On the contrary, given the allegations of foreign powers being complicit in the outbreak of the violence in southern Kyrgyzstan in 2010 (Gullette & Heathershaw 2015, p. 134), the Soviet discourse of suspecting foreigners to be spies is nowadays being redirected towards journalists and researchers alike (see Lottholz & Meyer 2016). Given the fact that many journalists and scholars present the situation in Kyrgyzstan in too simplistic and dramatic ways to gain attention,[6] such concerns and the corresponding rejection and securitizing practices may be justifiable or at least understandable from an emotional point of view. However, exaggerated mistrust leads to disengagement from research that tries to deal with the context in more nuanced and appropriate ways, and even to non-participation in entirely apolitical data gathering, such as voice recordings for linguistic research (Lottholz & Meyer 2016). Another concern about engagement with foreign researchers is that many of them conceive of their visits as data gathering or extraction exercises that are geared towards linear analyses fitting into established research frameworks and lacking any follow-up or long-term conversation. There is thus a perception that researchers are more interested in superficial interaction that helps them tick boxes, present themselves as experts and further their careers rather than helping to bring about change and offer insights into the lives of their research subjects (see Sheely 2016, p. 945).

Throughout my field research period, I faced a number of such challenges, from the popular allegations that I might be a spy to doubts about the viability of my research and my ability to carry it out. The former, more easily dismissible dis-

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[6] See section two above.

course was presented to me in daily life, mostly by taxi drivers wondering for what reasons I was visiting this city in southern Kyrgyzstan all the way from the UK, who paid for my expenses and how come I spoke such good Russian. The constant need to explain my origin and activities towards fellow travellers, shop vendors, café, restaurant and internet club staff and visitors slowly accumulated psychological pressure and frustration about the apparent impossibility to just do my job like anyone else. I particularly remember one emotional outburst *vis-à-vis* my partner (who lived in the capital Bishkek while I was travelling to do research) whom I told how, on a personal level, I could not stand the constant questioning, which made a normal existence simply impossible.

Many friends explained me that this was simply the usual Kyrgyzstani curiosity and was thus to be taken as something positive. One might also argue that this is the price to be paid when one chooses to do research in a foreign country. Still, these sometimes alienating and annoying effects one's own foreigner identity can have on the social environment should be well taken into account. Malekzadeh notes that foreign researchers have a 'special' status anywhere (2016, p. 867) and Sheely (2016, p. 941) reflects on how, during her research in rural Kenya, she was automatically associated with ranchers and NGOs given her white skin colour, a labelling that she could not escape and that shaped her research access and possibilities. Neither of these accounts, nor Wilkinson's reflection on the curiosity her presence sparked among people in Osh and Bishkek (2008, p. 56-57), consider that constant exposure to people's questioning of one's outsider status and intentions can lead to serious irritation and emotional distress.

The issues I faced in everyday interactions were partly amplified during the interaction with the different organizations described above. While the terms of the different cooperation agreements made the value of my research unmistakably clear, the engagement and cooperation differed, especially among staff in the organization discussed in case 1. With time, however, it became clear that not all members of the staff were convinced by my research and its value for the organization, contrary to the office head with whom I had agreed on the cooperation. Some expressed this

explicitly towards me, while others, generally less senior members, chose not to engage too much with me beyond polite small talk. I felt increasing discomfort with this silent abstention. It appeared as if a disagreement within the staff body was negotiated through (non-) engagement my research project.

This divergence of cooperation among people within organizations is also subject to 'persistence, personality and identity' (Feldman et al. 2003, p. 106), areas in which I was not able to score high enough to justify a better reception. It appears that my self-confident and matter-of-fact mannerisms were perceived as potential interference or threat of people's status and work routine. This was most obvious when I presented my previous research on post-conflict reconstruction in southern Kyrgyzstan, which was seen to be rather un-innovative, given its relatively sparse empirical grounding and overly theoretical and comparative orientation. Had I, in a true 'grounded theory' manner, pretended not to know anything and been more humble and curious about getting to know the work of this organization (Feldman et al. 2003, p. 150 ff.), it seems this cooperation would have turned out much more fruitful.

This feeling of being inadequate was further enhanced by the cognitive dissonance I felt when, on some occasions, NGO leaders and other staff would confer value, importance and acknowledgement to my research project but would not repeat these acts of valorization in larger circles. This was understandable given the fact that the heads and contact persons preferred to arrange cooperation in an unbureaucratic way that dispensed with clarifying the purpose and value of my research with all members of a given organization. On the other hand, however, this gave my activity an opaque and semi-covert status, which was better not to be discussed in order to avoid misunderstandings or the realization that people did not actually agree on whether and how to cooperate with me (see Mckenzie 2009, 5.4). Correspondingly, making my research fully understood and putting people at ease was only possible when full disclosure of my activities was provided either by myself (as in case 3) or organization members (as in case 2).

Furthermore, it often felt strange when the same people that had earlier rejected my research for sensitivity reasons or lack of understanding, would approach me on conferences or large gatherings and ask how the research was going or, if I could explain again what it was actually about. On one project summary conference, the head of one NGO which had earlier signalled that I could only continue my research if I managed not get the youth committee's approval for my activities (case 3), told me how important they thought engagement with international researchers was and that they appreciated my presence on the conference and efforts to deliver an analysis of the youth council project.

Such contradictory positions may well be due to misunderstandings and evolving perceptions of researcher's competency and integrity as well as changing evaluations of the possible benefits of research-practice cooperation. Still, it is important to note the inconsistent and sometimes hypocritical character of such behaviour, especially when positive statements occur only once people realize they are dealing with a researcher who might have an international standing, genuine expertise and corresponding influence at their disposal. This strategic behaviour of selectively but not wholeheartedly supporting involvement with research cooperation mirrors, on the one hand, an understandable pragmatism by which NGOs reserve full support for the most promising – in terms of money, prestige, or visibility – partnerships (see Lottholz 2017, p. 18). It is also understandable given the widespread perceptions that international journalists and researchers may be doing research on topics and in ways that conflict with state security (see section two above), and given the widespread mistrust towards foreigners. On the other hand, it also puts pressure on researchers to promise more than they are able to deliver and leaves them in awkward situations when they fall short of their goals.

The contrast between the friendly mood often surrounding me on larger gatherings and the reservation and reluctance to provide support when a return was not immediately foreseeable is well captured by Adams' metaphor of the researcher as a mascot, i.e. someone who is 'honored to be chosen, warmed by the attention and affection [of the group]' but also 'has lost control of [their] identity', is expected

to 'perform tricks that may be beyond [their] capabilities' and 'must show their gratitude to the team by always being a boost' (Adams 1999, p. 334).

These dynamics fed into an at times significant fieldwork blues, as I often reflected and perhaps overanalyzed my misdeeds instead of accepting the defeats, impasses and failures encountered. I got additionally frustrated by the discrepancy between the data I managed to initially gather in the 'research proper' and, on the other hand, the level of discrimination, marginalization and hidden conflict present in southern Kyrgyzstan at that very moment (see Megoran et al. 2014; Bennett 2016). Instead of having the patience to meet people and build relationships that would help me to shed light on the construction of this 'Potemkin village' façade, I stuck fast on the very fact that reality was bifurcated and there was little I could do to get to the ground of things. This frustration sometimes prevented me from engaging in interesting conversations, such as when one friend of a friend commented on my research: 'well, then you're in the right place here, because here, somehow, every person is politicized [*zdes kazhdyi chelovek politizirovan*]'. I could not react calmly but aired my full endorsement of this finding: 'Yes, that's right! And you know what? You are the first person to actually say it like this!' My overly vigorous reaction pushed the conversation back to more 'light' topics and, rather than following the thought of this individual, made me fall back into reflection on the limits of research in this context and the biases it must be subject to when people actually are ready to talk to foreign researchers.

In this sense, even though technically 'free', my research was inherently limited by the emotional and discursive effects of the securitized and politicized research environment in southern Kyrgyzstan, which made members of organizations/networks I cooperated with, and the population at large take a vary stance in interaction with me. The research was further limited by my own limited ability to navigate the often competitive, masculinized and superficial sector of internationally financed conflict, peace and security NGOs.

6. Conclusion

In this article, I have shown how research projects inquiring conflict, peace and security in politicized contexts may be limited in terms of their scope and freedom, even though they are technically and legally free. Rather than solely focusing on limitations and problems, I demonstrated how I tried to navigate the well-known limitations and difficulties of doing research in Kyrgyzstan by devising a practice-based and cooperative approach towards research. I arranged cooperation projects with an international NGO working on peace and security, a national NGO network working on police reform and community security promotion and an initiative to enhance the capacity of 'territorial youth councils' in a town in southern Kyrgyzstan. This nuanced, practice-based approach and corresponding attempt to create a win-win situation for the organization and the researcher was initially greeted in all organizations. However, as I have further analyzed, its realization was subject to negotiation and open or hidden resistance. Although some disengagement was ambiguous and might equally have stemmed from misunderstandings and adverse circumstances, it was more obvious in other cases. To provide more background on this negotiated and piecemeal realization of research, I have elaborated on the psychological and emotional factors of doing research and being researched in the context of Kyrgyzstan. Thus, rather than suggesting a straightforward assessment of the actions of my interlocutors and myself, I have shown how behaviours, decisions and opinions are subject to spontaneous reactions, inter-subjective sense-making processes and evaluations of persons and projects over time. In this sense, the behaviour of people at the forefront of knowledge production in the global periphery cannot be subjected to moral binaries, but needs to be understood in its contingent and deeply contextual nature.

Two main implications for the discussion of challenges to academic freedom in the context of contemporary global politics emerge from this analysis. First, while academic freedom is a useful category to further agendas geared towards securing the possibility for researchers to do their work and make their significant contribution to the peaceful and sustainable development of societies, there is also a

need to discuss the ways in which technically or legally 'free' research may be subject to different influences and biases. As this and other analyses (see Area 2013; Loyle 2016; Sheely 2016) have shown, the content and outcomes of research are constantly negotiated, networked and evaluated against their social and political background. Additional discussions are needed on why certain interests, approaches and theories give researchers more freedom to do research than others, not only in regard to the research context itself but also when it comes to funding policies and audiences.

Second, as regards the actors limiting academic freedom and influencing research, analysis should not merely focus on the role of regimes and state actors such as security services or law enforcement. In most contexts across the globe, the more problematic issue faced by researchers is that either people do not understand what academic research is in the first place – and thus choose to impede or abstain from it (see Mckenzie 2009) – or, and perhaps more problematically, presume that they can or should share only certain opinions and information with researchers, whether their goal is to present their country or community in a positive light (see Bekmurzaev et al. forthcoming) or to highlight a specific issue or agenda for which they hope the research can help mobilize support and attention (Markowitz 2017). Such distorted versions of research can incur perceptions of political bias and interference and thus increase the risk of limitations and barring of research. Therefore, a strategic approach at navigating the (self-) politicization of academic research may be needed to better secure free academic inquiry.

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