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# Pacing emotional labour of qualitative research in an intractable conflict environment

## Abstract

Qualitative field research in any type of terrain calls for a practice-oriented reflection on the researcher's emotional labour management in relation to the context of the field before, during and beyond data collection. Intractable conflict environments (ICE) are characterised by long running social crises still unresolved. This particularity makes such contexts risk-prone in terms of unpredictable dangers and unexpected outcomes, hence, the requirement for thorough ethical evaluation of field research designs. Field researchers, often working on their own, are expected to safely make ethically sound decisions while gathering high quality data within complex social realities of which they are often socio-culturally unaware. This inevitably exacerbates the emotional burden on the researchers and makes fieldwork challenging. Although feminist geographers have significantly contributed to highlighting the social dynamics of fieldwork by initiating and deepening discussions of the emotional and ethical challenge, discussions have rarely gone beyond underlining the need for recognition of the field researchers' emotional labour. Despite academic consensus for reflexive analysis and field diary keeping, little has been discussed on how to systematically manage this effort during the research process. In this paper, building on the first author's PhD fieldwork experience in Israel and the West Bank area, we propose a paced field research organisation method – PFROM – which systematically accommodates time and space for the researcher's engagement with and detachment from the intensity of the field research. Applying the concept of pacing – intentionally distributing focused attention in such a way that will reduce fatigue prior to the completion of a task – this framework systematically integrates reflexivity within research designs. The PFROM provides researchers with a tool applicable beyond the context of intractable conflict locations which has the potential to enhance their emotional labour management.

Key words: emotional labour, pacing, engagement, detachment, intractable conflict

## Introduction

*"The soldiers they can be friendly sometimes but can be cruel and humiliating often", a middle-aged man mentioned almost causally as we stood in line waiting to go through the checkpoint. The Palestinian guide, Abed, a 21-year old man, has a surprisingly mature outlook over the situation of the soldiers posted at the checkpoint 200 m from his home - "most of them are just kids with guns. What do you expect to happen, if you give the most sophisticated gun to a young kid who's just left school and basically tell him that he can do whatever he wishes. He's got all the rights and those people- that is, us- are the enemies?". His voice was calm. He paused allowing me to digest the information and then continued: "I remember once a soldier telling me: 'you know I don't want to be here, I'd rather be with my girlfriend somewhere and enjoying myself on the beach... but it's complicated."*

I learn later that Abed lost his 16 year old cousin who, a couple of years earlier, fell under the bullet of an Israeli soldier: *"my cousin was stopped at the checkpoint and they asked him to put down what*

*he was carrying. It was his birthday cake. They humiliated him and he got carried away and replied some words. But they just shot him. I mean he was just a 16 year old kid carrying his birthday cake unarmed... There's the video on Youtube I think. The sequence where he is shot is cut. You just see him lying dead on the ground...it was later claimed that he was carrying an unidentified object and had refused to cooperate. And you know the woman who shot him is free and everyone knows who she is and she is working on another checkpoint in the same area. She was not reprimanded, nothing."*

Field diary excerpt, 2015

#### Box 1 Field Diary excerpt from queuing at a checkpoint

No field experience is void of emotional aspects. The story related in Box 1 from Bundhoo's fieldwork diary in 2015 in Israel and the West Bank area testifies to the complexity of information researchers deal with. The role of the qualitative field researcher is instrumental in gathering data from informants, understanding it and delivering this understanding to the public (Janesick, 2000; Lincoln, et al 2011). To achieve these tasks, we are expected to gather data of the 'best' quality possible with the most 'ethically-responsible' and 'safe' methods improvised or planned. Often, as qualitative field researchers we are neither psychologists nor high-risk project managers. And we need not be. The primary job in the field is to gather data. However, we cannot overlook the social dynamics and emotional work involved in fieldwork. This paper ventures into this complex domain, exploring the ethical and methodological implications of conducting research in 'risky' situations. It discusses the emotional labour of research, navigating complex personal geographies and the need for reflexivity. It concludes by proposing a method for managing these complex circumstances based on pacing of activity.

### Emotional labour

Emotions and emotional work involved in field research have been discussed under different angles in the literature. Feminist geographers have significantly contributed to highlighting social and emotional challenges of fieldwork – mainly on relationships between researchers and participants - initiating and deepening discussions around emotional and ethical issues (Wimark et al 2017). Meanwhile, discourses have rarely gone beyond underlining the need for recognition of the researchers' wellbeing whilst in the field (Rivas & Browne, 2018; Thomson, 2013). Jokinen and Caretta (2016), have argued for the recognition that discourses of ability, in both expectations and conduct, dominate fieldwork. Reflecting on their own experiences, they noted several instances when they encountered sickness and fatigue and were unable to continue with their fieldwork. Similarly, recognising researchers' well-being, Mitchell and Irvine (2008), exploring mental health and employment in the UK, pointed out the importance of researchers' awareness of their "research footprint" in the positive and negative consequences of the research process. They concluded that reflexivity and responsiveness of researchers towards participants' emotional well-being is as important as funders' and employers' sensitivity to the impacts of social research on researchers' well-being (Mitchell & Irvine, 2008).

More recently, Bergman Blix & Wettergen (2015, p. 688) have argued for active approaches towards emotions' management and understanding in qualitative research - "emotions are a vital source of information and researchers use emotions strategically". They argue that this 'emotional labour' is conditional for successful data collection since initiating, developing and maintaining rapport with participants involves 'continuous emotion work' (Bergman Blix & Wettergren, 2015; p. 691).

McGarrol (2017), notes the lack of attention towards emotional labour involved in field research and contends that recognising the “complex nature of emotion work in fieldwork” contributes towards researchers’ well-being during and beyond field research. We concur. We can define emotional labour as a process that involves an effort-demanding regulation of one’s state of mind towards a particular purpose. In the case of field research, the purpose is gathering and processing relevant data intended to answer research questions.

Qualitative field research calls for a practice-oriented reflection on the researcher’s emotional labour management in the context of the field before, during and beyond data collection. The ethical responsibility of the researcher entails continuous critical reflection all along the research process. As researchers, we constantly review our reflections based on feedback from our own experiences and shared with us by peers and participants. Field researchers, often working on our own, are expected to make ethically sound decisions while gathering high quality data within complex socio-cultural realities which may be unfamiliar. This inevitably exacerbates the emotional burden and makes fieldwork challenging. There is therefore an urgent and overt need for a framework to help field researchers integrate emotional labour peri-data collection, given the rising social conflicts globally.

We postulate therefore that careful and proactive emotional management involves a virtuous cycle between researchers’ emotional well-being and an enhanced ability to produce more reliable research analysis. Schmidinger (2018) argues: “on our own emotional attachment and our own involvement in the social setting which we are conducting research, is necessary not only for our own mental well-being but also for our research” (p.223). Producing valid and relevant information, thus, requires organisation of the *in-flow of information* as well as a degree of critical distance kept with the field intensity. We describe the nurturing of this critical distance as a form of pacing of the researcher’s emotional engagement with the intensity of the field. Borrowed from sports science literature, the concept of pacing means the process of managing energy invested in order to avoid fatigue prior to the completion of a task (Skorski & Abbiss, 2017). By analogy, pacing one’s emotional labour is the process of intentionally distributing one’s emotional engagement with the intensity of information inflows through organised phases of detachment. In this paper, we explore the position of the social researcher in conflict-affected field sites, building on Bundhoo's PhD fieldwork experience and refined through exchanges on our respective research experiences in conflict contexts. We conclude by proposing a method of organisation – the paced field research organisation method (PFROM) – which is underpinned by this analysis.

## Intractable Conflict Environments and emotional burden

Intractable conflict environments (ICEs) are characterised by long-running social crises. ICEs – notably the Israeli and West Bank region - involve low to medium conflict in the background with unpredictable peaks of violent outbursts (Cohen-Chen, et al, 2014) and the locations of these are spatially difficult to pre-determine. This adds to the difficulty of researcher access to different territories and the socio-ethnic groups often in conflict with each other. As Khan Mohmand et al. (2017) have reported, a climate of heightened insecurity discourages long periods of exposure and immersion in such fields. Because such contextual factors directly impact the fieldwork design, they cannot be overlooked by researchers designing and carrying out fieldwork.

It is a fact that each qualitative research experience in the field is unique and comes with its own set of challenges (Murray & Overton, 2014). The feasibility of any data collection is conditional on access to the field –the physical area and the relevant people willing to participate. This further involves

existence of sufficient time and financial resources to ensure that fieldwork can be carried out efficiently.

### *ICE Fieldwork in point*

The Israeli and West Bank region is a confluence of heterogeneous populations of varying ethnic origin, systems of belief or religious backgrounds, socioeconomic status and political positioning. Although the social fractures are shaped by the complexities of the area, discussing these here is beyond the scope of this paper. We focus instead on the **geographical factors** and **observed socio-cultural** norms which directly influenced the qualitative fieldwork in the area in terms of the management of risks, research ethics and the researcher's emotional management of peri-data collection.

### *Complex and subjective geographies*

People define the territories in very different ways and the societies are far from being homogeneous groups. . The geography of the region of Israel and the West Bank is itself matter of subjective debate. After all, the conflict is an intractable, and ongoing one affected by immigration and geopolitical turmoil. Two descriptors are key to have an understanding of the complexity: a) the Barrier or Wall of Separation between the State of Israel and the Palestinian West Bank territories and b) the archipelagic nature of the West Bank area. The mixture of political decisions and other contingencies have resulted: a uniquely complex patched and disputed terrain with controlled geographic mobility (Boulus-Rødje, 2018). This is archipelagic geographical reality with different socio-ethnic groups often in conflict with each other adds to the difficulty for the researcher to access the different areas whose boundaries are indiscernible most of the time unless marked by a checkpoint or the number plates of cars – green for Palestinians with Arabic writing and yellow with a blue 'IL' logo for Israeli. The final element is the positionality of the researchers. This paper is based on Bundhoo's fieldwork supervised by Lynch and a colleague. Bundhoo was born and brought up in the multiethnic context of Mauritius and appreciated the importance and value of acknowledging diversity of value systems. This was further developed through travel and higher education in Europe. The transition to the field research in Israel and Palestine was smoothed by a preliminary experience as a backpacker with a tour operator that explicitly worked with Israeli and Palestinian hosts, allowing a form of social and cultural acclimatization. Lynch's experience was in conducting research in post conflict settings in the global South, so his role was to advise on the development of the approach and provide perspective.

### *Distrusting context*

Societies ridden with intractable conflict as a backdrop of their daily lives are marked by distrust and Israel and the West Bank area are no exception. Smooha's studies (Smooha, 1987, 2016) surveying opinions of Jewish and Arab citizens of Israel over several decades – 1970s till 2015 - have shown blatant difference in people's perceptions. He writes: "Collective memory is apparently the most divisive issue between Arabs and Jews, constantly nourishing the deep distrust between them" (Smooha, 2016). He further notes that, while over three fifths of Jews surveyed in 2015 believed that "Palestinians are Arabs who settled in the Land of Israel that belongs to the Jewish people" (Smooha, 2016, p. 287:288), and just over half of the Arabs surveyed in 2012 think that the "Jews are alien settlers who usurped the lands from the Arabs". Such a differential social representation of the 'other' raises critical questions as to the levels of trust in the society. For the foreign researcher, it is important to be alert to such contextual risk factors. Being alert helps avoid ethical mistakes towards participants and risks of jeopardising the researcher's own security and hence, the feasibility of the research.

ICEs' unpredictable outbursts are one problem but the ongoing low intensity tension in the background of a seemingly normal life can be deceptive to the unaware or unfamiliar researcher. For instance, travelling for the first time in the West Bank, Bundhoo relates an anecdote (see Box 2) that marked her learning of necessary vigilance at all times during fieldwork. People kindly but firmly corrected her when she mentioned that she had arrived from 'Israel'.

""you mean 'Palestine'"" , they said with an inquisitive smile. I felt iced for a second and then smiled back expressing my uneasiness. I had no intention of getting into any political discussions and certainly not in a shared taxi with 5 strangers whose language I don't speak. So I remained silent and watched the moving scenery of dry hills sparsely covered with old and young olive trees. I breathed and learned to shut up."(Field diary excerpt, 2015).

#### Box 2 Field Diary excerpt from taxi ride

She equally met others who had no problem recognising and naming the land beyond the separation barriers as Israel. Opinions diverge greatly and the perception of facts is not the same from one person to another. It becomes important to be careful and alert and recede from certain situations before things get too complicated or out of control. For example on occasions, tensions within the research location rose and it was safest for the researcher to remove herself from the area as it was not always possible to know how civil disturbances could develop. This is a reality which as field researchers in ICEs we are confronted with. It is therefore imperative for the field researcher to be prepared. Preparation involves time and task management but also management of the emotional labour which goes into receiving and coping with these situations. The researcher's mental focus has an influence on the quality of the data gathered.

Flexibility in time and space which are two, often, scarce resources in ICEs. Accessibility to the field has been discussed in the literature in terms of 1) security of the researcher; 2) availability of resources (language skills, time and funding) (Hoglund & Oberg, 2011)); and much less with regard to 3) the willingness of people to participate in the research process (Bundhoo, 2018). Working towards making data collection happen thus involves managing and adapting to several changing elements simultaneously. This entails an emotional pressure which, if not paced, can become out of control and rapidly cause fatigue, stress and escalate to burnout (Bayhan Karapinar et al, 2016; Waddill-Goad, 2019). Proactive ethical and risk evaluations while developing field research designs help, but are not sufficient to cope with the ongoing fieldwork uncertainties and contingencies. This is where pacing one's emotional labour with the contextual factors, research objectives and one's physical and psychological feedback become important *throughout* qualitative field research.

#### Reflexivity and field diary

The use of a field diary is one strategy of managing emotional labour in field research. Most of the qualitative literature in relation to fieldwork seem to suggest a tacit agreement on the systematic use of a field diary as a place to reflexively transcribe a) the researcher's intrapersonal experience: thoughts, feelings, observations on her/his own behaviours, thoughts and emotional patterns; b) the researcher's relationships with the people (co-participants of the study and trusted peers) through the exchanges which happen during the data collection period and until the research is written up; c) the journey throughout the research and thoughts over the theories with which they engage.

Researchers have not tarried in naming the methodological significance of reflexivity in qualitative research (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009; Berger, 2015; Day, 2012; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Hibbert, et al, 2014; Holloway, 2011; Mauthner & Doucet, 2003; Spencer, Ritchie, Lewis, & Dillon, 2003; Takhar-Lail & Chitakunye, 2015; Temple & Edwards, 2008). Likewise, Billo and Hiemstra (2013) have underlined, using their PhD experiences, the necessary need for flexibility and reflexivity in the earlier stages of the research process discussing mainly the researcher's personal needs and logistical challenges.

Keeping a field diary is the go-to method to record reflections and observations and can be described as a space and time dedicated to a reflexive exercise. However, writing up qualitative research accounts or reflections, especially in risky or difficult fieldwork circumstances, may be a challenging task. Additionally, data thus collected at periods of crisis may not be necessarily useful as Nilan (2002) has pointed out. Despite academic consensus for reflexive analysis and field diary keeping, little has been discussed on **how to systematically manage this effort** during the research process. Writing up data collected and effectively managing one's emotional labour are two different and distinct elements. The first does not necessarily cater for the second. And vice versa.

The question of practicality and feasibility of fieldwork in difficult contexts is already challenging, with or without a field diary or emotional labour management. Writing up a field diary requires making time and is effort-demanding. For Bundhoo for instance, it was an effort to write up the daily field diary and sometimes it was not possible to write at all given the physical fatigue or the unfavourable circumstances. The PFROM we propose here has been developed purposively in the context of an intractable conflict environment for applicability in a wider variety of contexts. A volatile background with several types and sources of tension and complexities keep the field researcher constantly on her/his toes. The method offers a framework for field researchers to learn to pace their emotional labour in phase with the research environment, contextual factors, research objectives, and researcher's physical and psychological feedback just like a sportsperson would as Renfree et al (2014) have described discussing endurance sport activities. Such pacing is all the more crucial in complex volatile backgrounds like ICEs.

## Pacing and field research emotional labour management method – PFROM

In field research, emotional labour involves an effort-demanding regulation of one's state of mind towards gathering and processing relevant data to answer the research questions. If not managed properly, especially whilst operating in high-risk environments such as ICEs, this work can become overwhelming or neglected in face of logistical challenges (Billo & Hiemstra, 2013). Such cases will be detrimental to the field researcher who will not be have capacity to effectively achieve his/her primary function of gathering and processing relevant data. The research environment, contextual factors, research objectives, and researcher's physical and psychological feedback are inflows to the field researcher's mind. Information inflows impact the researcher and he/she has to make the effort of managing that mass of information while keeping his/her emotional state balanced.

We have termed the magnitude of information inflows towards the researcher when he/she is in the field as field intensity. The greater the intensity the more alert the researcher needs to be. At the same time, in ICEs, the field intensity is such that one has to be constantly alert. As Schmidinger (2018) suggests, for researchers working in conflict environments, permanent risk management is necessary and "it is important to follow local news and talk to locals about local conditions" (p.229). Permanent risk management means that "at every point of a research it is necessary to rethink if something is too dangerous" (p.229). This alertness requires the researcher's mind be engaged with the field intensity. However, this alertness – that focused attention - can only be maintained effectively over a certain period of time. After all, as researchers we are human beings with emotional and physiological needs and limitations. So throughout the research process, it becomes important to sift through the inflows of information coming our way as a first step for managing our emotional labour as field researchers.

Nurturing this critical distance from the immediate situational inflows that the field researcher is experiencing is an actual effort which we have termed as detachment. It is necessary for the

researcher and, in effect, the research itself. Sometimes taking a deep breath and retreating subtly from a situation is the best strategy. At other times, taking a break from the research work or seeking peer support may help. All research experiences and researchers are different and listing the different strategies will never be exhaustive and is not the purpose of our present paper. Our endeavour here is to frame emotional labour management in terms of paced detachment and engagement for field researchers. Pacing one's emotional labour is that process of intentionally distributing one's focused attention towards the intensity of information inflows through organised phases of detachment to manage fatigue during the research project.

Pacing emotional labour is achieved through two focal points: the research and the researcher. We purposively separate the research as an object of inquiry and the researcher as the instrument of analysis and agent of the research. Moving beyond mere recognition of emotional labour, the PFROM approach systematises its management into the research process. Progressively, the researcher adapts to the field's environment and contextual factors through a first phase of sorting emerging information inflows. This sifting is an ongoing process especially in ICEs. This first phase is determining as it allows the field researcher to filter the sources of and relevance of immediate information. Disciplining the inflow of information this way allows the researcher to take a step back and look critically at what is literally coming at her/him. The stepping back can take any form and may be context-sensitive and subjective strategies that vary from research project to project and from one researcher to another. Figure 1 describes sorting the information inflows from the research environment, including both active evidence gathering activities and passive accumulation of information and contextual factors. The heightened intensity of the context of an ICE means that researchers have to be aware of the passive accumulation of contextual information so they can assess changing circumstances and manage the risks of their research location. This can also affect their evidence gathering and has to be managed carefully.

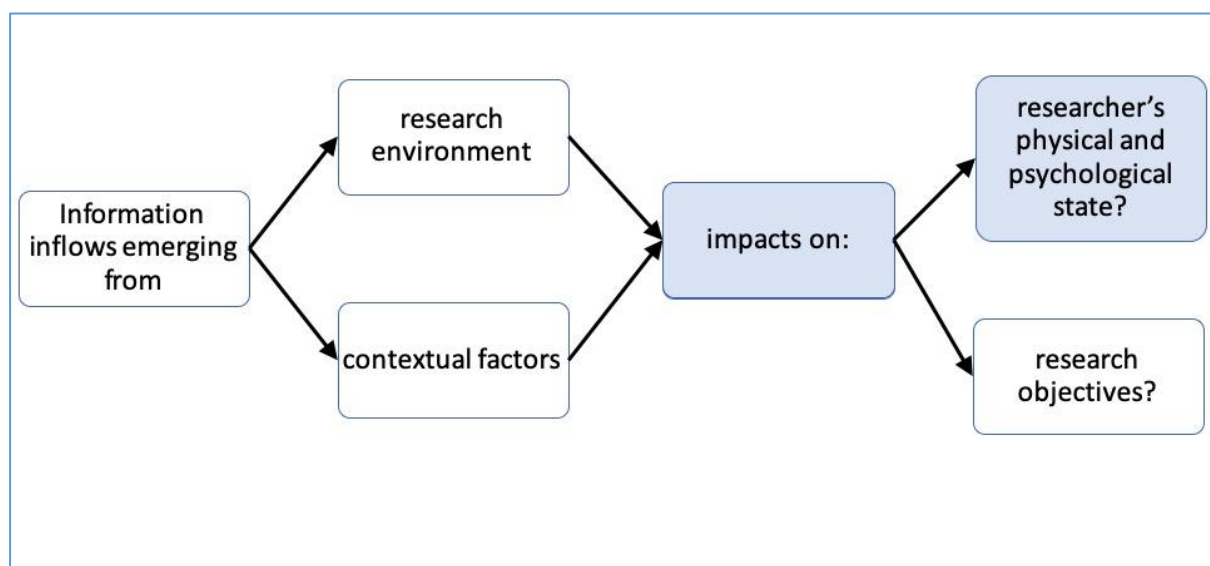


Figure 1 Sorting Information inflows emerging from the research environment and contextual factors

Asking what the impacts of the research environment and the contextual factors on the physical and psychological state of the researcher is key to nurturing a critical distance from the field intensity. This represents an evaluation of the researcher's physical and mental state in relation to the immediate field intensity. At any stage of the research process, once this question is asked, the

detachment space is created. Within the detachment space the researcher can evaluate risks he/she may encounter, question ethical issues and make decisions (intuitively or rationally).

Achieving a balanced outlook, as the story of the young Palestinian guide illustrates, is not an easy task. Amidst the field intensity, taking a step back and nurturing the critical distance necessary is challenging if the mind is not primed before-hand. That particular story triggered the thinking around emotional labour management for Bundhoo who was marked by that young man's capacity to have such a lucid attitude towards emotionally burdensome situations.

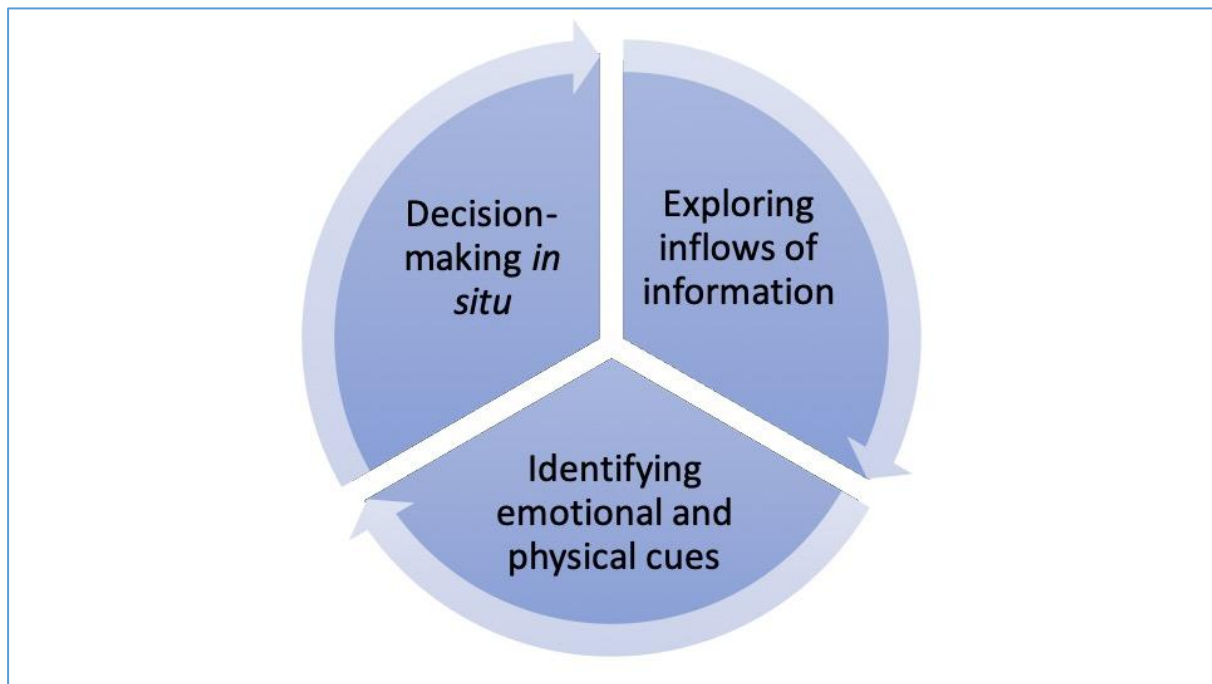


Figure 2 The PFROM framework for an ongoing systematic management of emotional labour

In practice, throughout the research process, exploring the inflows of information, discussed above and illustrated in Figure 2, is a necessary first phase so that the researcher takes time to withdraw from the field intensity and look reflexively at the inflows of information. Second, identifying emotional and physical cues which hint at how these inflows may be impacting his/her mental and physical self. Third, the researcher needs to process these cues. This decision-making process is a topic that is beyond the scope of this paper. In practice, these three phases happen fast in the mind. We purposively decomposed them for our awareness as researchers and to help enhance our abilities to manage the emotional labour required throughout the research process.

## Conclusion

This paper aimed to explore the challenge of designing a research approach in conflict-affected locations that enables the researcher to manage the research intensity and emotional labour demanded to carry out such research. Much research on the position of the researcher focuses on the 'research footprint', or the impact of the researcher and their activity on the host communities and landscape. This paper focuses on exploring the researcher as the primary instrument of the research who are subjected to considerable 'research intensity' where the research location is at risk of conflict. This is based on reflections on Bundhoo's field experiences in Israel and the West Bank where there is constant risk of unpredictable outbursts of violent conflict together with ongoing low-level tensions. These experiences have been combined with reflection before, during and after the

fieldwork in the context of the wider literature on research in conflict-affected locations. We have concluded that the researcher has a responsibility to consider pacing their emotional labour and the impact that may have on the quality and validity of their research.

The paper proposes that the need to take account of the issues can be addressed by the application of a method that manages the challenges identified. Firstly, the paper reinforces proposals made by others that a reflexive field diary is kept, as this can record these challenges to the research. A reflexive field diary also requires some critical distance to be maintained by the researcher and this serves the purpose of also managing the research intensity, requiring some time away from the field. The management of this approach can best be achieved through a method that we have described as PFROM that provides a framework to acknowledge the contextual aspect of research. It allows for the necessary flexibility implied by systematically accommodating time and space for the researcher's engagement with and detachment from the field research's intensity. This context-sensitivity allows researchers to systematically enhance their abilities to manage their emotional labour during the research process in any context in practice and avoid fatigue or burn-out.

We have postulated that careful and proactive emotional management involves a virtuous cycle between researchers' emotional well-being and an enhanced ability to produce more reliable research analysis. PFROM is intended to make researchers aware of the range of information that they have to process and is a tool to accompany the field researcher's processing of these information inflows. In our experience, investing time and energy proactively to prepare the research design with the PFROM has proven to be useful for the data quality achieved in our research.

### Limitations

While we have proposed a framework to facilitate appropriate management and responses to the challenges we have identified, we are also aware that there are limitations. This approach requires self-reflection and psychological awareness of one's self, as well as ongoing reflection on field experience. This makes the process time and effort-demanding, as it requires the researcher to observe and record events in the field and reflect on them using the framework in retrospect.

There are three implications to be considered. Firstly, some researchers will be better than others at the discipline of maintaining a field diary. Secondly, adopting this approach requires that researchers take time to manage the process. This means knowing when to trade off data collection for in-field reflection. Third, in ICEs there is the risk that researchers will inevitably have experiences that may cause longer psychological or emotional trauma that may require professional or medical assistance. Researchers need to be prepared to protect themselves from this and respond if this occurs. For example, Bundhoo pre-booked a counselling session on her return after the first field visit as a precaution. It was not needed and subsequently cancelled, but reassuring to know that it was available.

Finally, the application of PFROM in different projects will help further evaluate its efficacy – exploring if it achieves what is intended in the face of varied contingencies and unpredictability of real life situations.

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