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Navigating Gender, Power and Perceptions when Researching NATO: A Conversation

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We both carried out our PhD research on the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO) engagement with the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. While Katharine's focus was on the alliance's political structures and public diplomacy and included visits to NATO in 2014, Matt's research visits took place in 2012 and examined NATO's military structures and the (re)construction of military masculinities and femininities. What follows is a conversation between us that captures some thoughts and feelings about conducting interviews at NATO headquarters.

Katharine A. M. Wright (Katharine): When I look back over my fieldwork diary, my first impressions of NATO HQ were about feeling uncomfortable and out of place during the visits. For example, the checkpoint registration at the gates never went smoothly. I was told during every visit that I was not on the list, despite the fact that my contact within NATO had booked me in as a visitor. This typically meant at least five minutes of waiting for the security officer to connect to my contact over the phone and left me with the distinct impression that I should not be there. Did you experience this kind of awkwardness during your visits?

Matthew Hurley (Matt): I did, and I had similar experiences at the checkpoint too! I found the place to be both exciting and underwhelming. The entrance is a mix of the functional – tired-looking fences topped with barbed wire, concrete crash barriers and bag scanners – combined with flashes of military grandeur, the twenty-eight flags in the courtyard surrounding the imposing sculpture of the NATO symbol. Navigating that space – the visuals, the sounds, those initial interactions – wasn't something I was necessarily conscious of in the moment, but the feeling of being out of place certainly was. My awkwardness was compounded by the assumptions I had, both about NATO and my interviewees, and how these were almost instantly challenged when I (eventually) got through the door. I was expecting austere military formality and the “company line” on WPS; what I got was much more informal and relaxed.

Katharine: It's interesting how similar our assumptions about NATO were. I wonder if, as we reflect on the process, our experiences will diverge? For me, those first interviews were a strange mix, and on reflection my reception was deeply gendered – in some interviews I was made to feel welcome, and they seemed genuinely pleased that someone was interested in NATO's work on WPS and that I had knowledge of NATO (something I seemed to have to prove). Interestingly, my knowledge of gender and UNSCR 1325 was not questioned in the same way. Perhaps as a female scholar it was assumed I *knew* about gender. In other interviews my presence was quite blatantly questioned. One experience sticks out in particular. At a national delegation, the individual I was interviewing had asked his military colleague to join us and directed the colleague to answer *all* my questions. At the end of the interview, we exchanged business cards at

which point he called his colleague back over to laugh at my affiliation to a faculty of humanities. They did not speak in English but I understood enough to pick up what they were saying. They did not want to make me feel comfortable; I was excluded from, but also the audience for, their exchange. On reflection I think my presence was threatening to them because they assumed that I *knew* about the topic. Experiences like this were just as valuable to my project as others where I felt more welcome, and often indicated further lines of inquiry. How were you received in your interviews? Was there an assumption that you knew about the topic you were there to talk to them about?

Matt: On the whole, I'd say yes. For example, one participant was initially reluctant to be interviewed as he viewed me as "much more of an expert" than himself. It took several emails to convince him that his experiences and views were relevant to my research. My reception was gendered in that my position as a man was used to frame responses to some of my questions. Illustrating her opinion that men and women viewed security "differently," one participant stated that, "our views have a different quality... I would do things in a different way than you do, my way is different but it is not worse than your way." Similarly, during a light-hearted discussion with a group of women I was told that I could not attend a classified briefing as "we have to keep our secrets from men like you." Another participant was very interested in me personally, describing me as "fascinating," as I was a "bloke interested in gender," something she rarely encountered in her work. In these discussions I was framed – as a representative of my sex – as both similar to and different from other men at NATO, something my civilian-researcher status further complicated. It was an interesting experience, as I don't consider myself fascinating, hate the term "bloke" and would not choose to conceive of myself in such a way! What it showed was I couldn't control how my participants would view me based on the external markers of my identity and their perceptions of these. It made me reflect deeply on my physical appearance and mannerisms. These experiences were very productive when analysing my data. One issue evident in both of our experiences is that of power and control in the interview – who has it and how does it shift? Interviews are (relatively) short and intense episodes with little time to substantially reflect when they are taking place. Did you have any strategies for navigating these power dynamics in the moment?

Katharine: I had the same sense that some participants drew upon my position as a woman to frame their responses and I let this play out. There was one situation in particular where the participant attempted to preclude my questions by detailing (at great length) the sexism she had experienced recently and seeking to draw common ground between us as women. It became difficult to interrupt her tirade against "everyday sexism," and I found myself left nodding along. This was perhaps the trickiest moment for me in terms of navigating power dynamics, partly because this encounter was so different from others. Looking back, her defensiveness to my questions about the parallels between "everyday sexism" and her experience as a woman working at NATO indicated there was something there, but not something she immediately felt comfortable to discuss with a stranger. The discussion exposed her personal vulnerability as a woman working within a resistant institution.

Matt: I agree. The navigation of shifting gender and power dynamics *within* interview settings are not always conscious strategies. What is apparent from our respective experiences is the utility –

indeed the *necessity* – of continually reflecting on and feeling feminist fieldwork, in order to more fully understand our findings, account for the presence of ourselves within our research and fully acknowledge the co-constitution of knowledge in such settings.

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