

Traumatising fieldwork

A personal experience

Daniëlle de Jongh

“What if you fall in love during fieldwork?”, a fellow student asked during our preparation course. “Well,” the professor replied, “if it leads to sex, either you’ll get married or you’ll never finish your thesis.” We all laughed. When I studied Cultural Anthropology in the early 1990s, it was the only time that sexuality in the context of fieldwork was mentioned. The topic of safety in the field did get some attention, but was discussed rather casually. Use your common sense, do not show off expensive stuff, and never attempt to resist if you get mugged. That was pretty much it. Sexual harassment was never discussed, let alone forced sex or the emotional impact of experiencing violence during fieldwork. Knowledge of PTSD seemed non-existent, even among student psychologists.

Dealing with the consequences of traumatic experiences in the field is without any doubt the loneliest process I have ever gone through. It has had a major and long-lasting impact on my self-esteem. Whatever I have achieved later in life has always been overshadowed by a dark cloud of shame and self-hatred. Until last year, when I joined LOVA’s Working Group *Safety in the Field* it had never occurred to me that there could be others struggling with similar experiences.

It shocked me when I realised that the very nature of fieldwork makes students and researchers in the field extra vulnerable to violence and abuse and that it is still barely recognised or discussed. It’s a disgrace. Universities must take responsibility and ensure more explicit preparation, support, and aftercare regarding traumatisation during

fieldwork. In this essay, I will share how PTSD has affected my life, focusing and reflecting on a few particular moments and memories. I have been silent for decades and I still have some hesitation in coming out with my story now. But if I can contribute even the slightest bit to ensuring that today's students are better taken care of than I was back then, it is worth breaking my silence.

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Writing this essay is not an easy task. Many years have passed since I conducted the fieldwork that was supposed to be the crowning achievement of my studies, in 1993. But trying to write about it still evokes night terrors that cause sleep deprivation, which in turn triggers emotional and physical unrest, anxiety, and concentration problems. Writing this means that tonight I will get lost in a dreadful environment, desperately looking for my home, until someone grabs my throat and my own hoarse cry wakes me up.

My first attempts to write this essay ended up in confusion and frustration. Either my mind instantly turned blank and numb the moment I sat down at my desk, or I experienced the exact opposite: an overwhelming stream of fragmented memories and strings of thoughts, so feverish it frightened me. Both states of mind resulted in a similar outcome: an almost irresistible urge to flee, mentally as well as physically, accompanied by very deep feelings of shame and failure.

Unfortunately, I have been familiar with this ever since I tried to write my thesis. Back then, I didn't understand it. Sure, I had never found writing easy, but I had never experienced such an outright fear of writing, leading to vicious recurring nightmares and crippling headaches. When the tension got too high, I would even faint. It made me feel stupid.

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“This is a terrible country for women; there’s no rule of law. Suppose a woman is raped. No one will ever believe her. If she goes to a police station, there’s a high chance that she’ll be abused by a policeman. Not even a foreign student like you would be believed. Suppose I were a bad person who wanted to do something to you – everyone would have seen that you got into my car voluntarily. I’ve introduced you to my wife and children; people know how much I’ve done for you. It’s terrible, but you would never be believed.” Oh, how he cared about the fate of those poor women. And I believed him. I trusted him. Until, months later, he raped me.

It wasn’t my own idea to perform my fieldwork in El Salvador, a country just emerging from civil war. I had always been an excellent student. Without much effort I combined the studies of Educational Sciences and Cultural Anthropology. I was young and determined to dedicate my future career to improving the living conditions of children around the world. In 1992 I was offered a job as a student assistant in the Department of Cultural Anthropology and was encouraged to perform my fieldwork in San Salvador. It was recommended to me as a promising and safe place for later post-doctoral research.

Upon arrival, the ink of the peace agreements had barely dried and safety was nowhere to be found. Twelve years of brutal violence against and among civilians had left deep traces in society. It didn’t take long before I witnessed a deadly shooting. Danger lurked everywhere: in the streets, on the buses, in taxis, at home, even in my bedroom. During my nine-month stay, I fell victim to armed robbery five to ten times (I deliberately stopped counting) and to sexual violence twice.

I was in no way prepared for this. Scared of being overwhelmed by emotions, I decided to try to forget the negative experiences as soon as possible and focus on the positive instead. Hence, after each incident I gave myself two options: feel bad and go home, or stay and get over it. I counted my blessings and reminded myself of how

privileged I was: unlike most Salvadorans I could always decide to leave. It took me half a lifetime to realise memories and emotions cannot be pushed aside that easily.

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Back in the Netherlands I moved into a nice apartment. Just a couple of weeks later my neighbour's apartment was struck by lightning and caught fire. In the middle of the night, we were evacuated by firemen and police. The thought that had kept me going in San Salvador, that I would be safe as soon as I got home, was shattered. Recently, my then boyfriend told me about that time: "I couldn't reach you anymore. You seemed to have lost all interest in things you used to like. And you slept a whole winter through; I can still picture you lying under your red duvet whenever I came by."

In fact, I didn't sleep a whole winter through: I was so terrified at night that I didn't dare to go to sleep before daylight. Still, I managed to pass my last exams. Thereafter I found a job in a residential home for people with learning difficulties. However, writing my thesis seemed an impossible task. I was plagued by writer's block and writing anxiety.

Although I avoided talking about it as much as possible, I was often asked when I was going to graduate and showered with well-intentioned advice: "What you need is discipline. Get up early, get plenty of exercise and fresh air, keep your desk tidy and your house clean, eat healthily, kick yourself in the arse and just write that thing." I desperately tried to follow this kind of advice and got tougher and tougher on myself, but it didn't help.

Looking back, it makes me sad. But back then, it filled me with feelings of shame and self-loathing: if it was so easy, how come I couldn't do it? Both the question and the unsolicited advice became more and more a trigger of the trauma I experienced. It feels alienating that I was given this kind of advice over and over

again. For three years I tried to write my thesis. I looked like a ghost, was alarmingly skinny and when I was startled by something, my reaction was so intense and obvious that it shocked others. Although no one knew about the sexual violence, except for two very close friends, I had never made it a secret that I had been mugged several times. I was nervous to a degree that can only be described as hyperarousal – a typical symptom of PTSD. But it wasn't recognised.

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Let me give you just one example out of many. After an early work shift, I was cycling to my boyfriend's house in a very quiet Dutch neighbourhood. A man carrying a large sports bag walked down the empty street. All of a sudden, a police car appeared and two police officers jumped out to arrest him. I jumped off my bicycle and hid behind a big bottle bank, anxiously waiting for a shooting. This would have been a normal response in San Salvador, but not in the Netherlands.

As I wasn't making much progress in writing my thesis, I spoke with the university's student psychological service. I told them about my fear of writing and the violence I had encountered during my fieldwork. I was informed that my situation was too complicated for the student psychologists and was advised to consult an external psychologist. No follow-up of any kind was given (so I received no extra or adapted support). It reinforced my conviction that something was wrong with me, and that my university bore no responsibility whatsoever.

When time went by and I still couldn't write a single paragraph without freezing or panicking, I wanted to start a new life and never look back again. So I gave up my relationship, my apartment, my job and my studies. But PTSD turned out to be more persistent than I had imagined.

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Although I have done relatively well and built a decent career for myself, there are several triggers that I've always avoided as much

as possible, to prevent re-experiencing my traumas. Job interviews have always been among the worst because at any moment I could be asked why I hadn't finished my studies. "For personal reasons" is rarely accepted as an appropriate answer, and instead tends to lead to more questions.

This even happened when I recently asked my former university if, I could still get a Bachelor's degree, based on my past results and a commitment made by the university itself years ago. What I thought was a straightforward question about a formality, seemed to be taken by the university as a challenge to withhold the degree from me by any means. I have experienced the process that followed as very painful, full of irrelevant personal questions and inappropriate assumptions.

At first, as always, I froze and my instincts told me to avoid these questions. But naively I forced myself to answer them as best as I could - I thought they were being asked to understand my motivation, not to discredit everything I said. Yet my answers have been used against me.

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Fears that kept me silent all these years became reality: my words were twisted and taken out of context. The blatant lack of empathy shown made it clear to me that my former university is deliberately blind to its own part in a case like mine. Although I am disappointed in some of the individuals involved, I cannot blame them personally. But I do blame the system they are part of which hides behind legal and rhetorical quibbling.

Recently more students and researchers have shared their experiences of traumatising fieldwork with LOVA and I feel alarmed that my experience continues to be repeated.

It's high time that universities acknowledge this subject and take responsibility. Fieldwork does place students and researchers at risk of

traumatisation. It should not depend on the commitment of individual professors whether (and how thoroughly) students are prepared for this.

A high level of openness should be created in which everybody feels safe to speak freely about risks and doubts concerning safety in the field. It should be clear from the start where students can turn to if things go wrong.

Professors, especially thesis supervisors, should be sensitive to signs of trauma. Universities should invite and encourage students who seem to have significantly changed after fieldwork, whether in appearance, behaviour, or functioning, to openly discuss possible problems they face. Since professors are not therapists, and the relationship between students and their professors is characterised more by dependency than by equality, professors should also know to which professionals they can refer students if they know or suspect trauma has occurred.

Student psychologists and university health services should be aware of symptoms of PTSD and know how to react. If they don't feel equipped well enough to give therapy themselves, they should know where to refer to and provide follow-up.

Traumatisation can lead to PTSD: a serious and often persistent disorder that can harm study results and future careers. Universities can play an important role in preventing and treating PTSD, if they take responsibility. Too much talent is wasted as a result of poor preparation and aftercare.

For almost thirty years I have blamed myself for everything and denied that I was traumatised, until I could no longer pretend that nothing had happened. Facing my traumas instead of merely surviving them and finally standing up for myself is far from easy. However, it has given me more relief than I could have ever dreamt of. I hope that other traumatised fieldworkers can experience such relief sooner.



About the author

Daniëlle de Jongh (1969) is a member of LOVA's Working Group *Safety in the Field*. She is a qualified translator, has worked as a political campaigner, and as editor for different media. Currently she is editor-in-chief of Proud2Bme.nl, the Dutch mental health platform on eating disorders.