

**Alexandru V. Roman**

California State University, U.S.A.

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## Studying Corruption: Reflections on the Methodological, Practical, and Personal Challenges

**Abstract** There is a growing recognition among scholars that those engaged in qualitative research often face a number of serious methodological and personal challenges. Rather surprisingly, these difficulties receive relatively limited attention within the academic literature. Given the rising role of qualitative methodologies within social science research, the benefits of and the need for honest and practical discussions regarding what researchers should expect when entering fieldwork become increasingly obvious. This article draws on my fieldwork experiences of studying public corruption in the Republic of Moldova, a former Soviet state. I provide reflections on the methodological, practical, and personal challenges of conducting qualitative research on a sensitive issue within a social setting that is not structurally inclined to support projects of such nature. The discussion is primarily focused on the research difficulties that are bound to arise with any attempt to confirm previously suggested propositions within the post-Soviet social matrices. This article and the suggestions made here fall in line with a number of other recent works which have been motivated by the call to share insights and guidance about the challenges, “tricks of the trade,” and dangers of fieldwork in remarkable settings.

**Keywords** Public Corruption; Eastern Europe; Republic of Moldova; Methodology; Challenges of Field Work

In recent years, there has been a significant turn in the nature of research practices embraced within the social sciences. Qualitative methodologies have become a widely accepted and an in-

dispensable part of the interpretative arsenal of a growing number of scholars. Part of this significant transformation has been driven by the realization that within social sciences it is becoming increasingly difficult to justify reaching conclusions within research settings that are divorced from the social context within which the meanings associated with a given issue are constructed. Currently, there is also a much deeper appreciation of the fact that a scholar can rarely construct satisfactory and accessible understandings of a specific topic without an intimate, “face-to-face” encounter with what is being explored.

**Alexandru V. Roman** is an Associate Professor with the College of Business and Public Administration at California State University, San Bernardino. He is the Director of The Research Institute for Public Management and Governance. His main research interests are public procurement, management, and corruption.

**email address:** [aroman@csusb.edu](mailto:aroman@csusb.edu)

The facility with which interpretations from qualitative research find agreement in our consciousness should not raise questions about the rigor that went into their inquiry. Quite the opposite, it should be a testament to the method’s ability to maintain readability while remaining decisively thorough. Observations, reflections, and stories without a doubt make for much more ambiguous research tools than measurable and countable units; yet, this ambiguity is also an enabler of unrestricted movement through theoretical space. For those “brave” enough to embrace the “messiness” of qualitative research, the intellectual rewards are often commensurate with the levels of assumed risks and difficulties. The latter, to be sure, are not trivial by any stretch of the imagination. In fact, there has been an increasing recognition that scholars engaged in qualitative research often face a number of practical, theoretical, and ethical challenges (see: Birch and Miller 2000; Dickson-Swift et al. 2006), that can impose significant personal and emotional burdens (Morse and Field 1995; Darlington and Scott 2002; Campbell 2013), but also raise substantial safety risks (Kovats-Bernat 2002; Belousov et al. 2007). Physical dangers are particularly real for researchers dealing with sensitive matters (Johnson and Clarke 2003; Dickson-Swift, Kippen, and Liamputtong 2007). Much of the recent literature on the issue is concentrated on researchers working in public health; those engaged in other fields receive significantly less attention (Dickson-Swift et al. 2007). Within this context, there is a pronounced need for researchers, especially for those operating outside of public health, to share guidance with others who also find themselves routinely operating within remarkable settings and dealing with complex issues. It is specifically in re-

sponse to this need that this piece was conceptualized and written.

This article shares the methodological insights that were gained during a study of public corruption in the Republic of Moldova. The actual outcomes of the study and their derivative analyses have been published elsewhere (see: Roman 2014a; 2014b; Roman and Miller 2014). This article does not intend to build on those discussions nor does it plan to significantly extend our understandings of corruption *per se*. Its contributions are considerably more focused and can be located within the methodological and practical insights that it offers. By and large, this article makes three important contributions. First, corruption is a very sensitive and difficult social issue to study. It does not lend itself neither easily nor cleanly to qualitative empirical inquiry. The study of corruption provides many opportunities for “things to go wrong.” The experience of investigating corruption is in many ways as challenging as the topic itself, and there is a number of ways in which a systematic inquiry into the dynamics of its study can help others and add to the ever developing base of methodological knowledge. A second notable contribution that this article makes lies in the insights that it provides on conducting research within an international setting, specifically that of post-communist countries. The reflections provided here, then, should be of particular interest for researchers who are concerned with examining organizations, institutions, and social change within the space of the former Soviet bloc. Finally, the experiences and understandings shared here were drawn from a replication effort; such studies are, for the most part, rare and difficult to conduct within the context

of qualitative research. This latter fact should assist researchers who are struggling with conceptualizing a replicative type effort within a context that is in meaningful ways different from the setting of the original study.

Beyond this introduction, the narrative of the article is structured within the frame of three major sections. The first section delineates the background of the original study and the experiences that have motivated this writing. The following section discusses the main methodological insights that were drawn from the Moldovan experience. Actual examples from the fieldwork are provided for the purpose of supporting the suggested arguments, but also to spice up the narrative. It is here, also, that each suggestion is discussed within the context of the corresponding body of scholarly literature. As it is customary, a few summarizing remarks and encompassing thoughts conclude the narrative.

### **The Study and Its Setting: Corruption in the Republic of Moldova**

The complexity and the conceptual difficulty associated with studying corruption is well-documented (see: Von Alemann 2004; de Graaf and Huberts 2008). Defining corruption, for instance, has turned out to be an exceptionally thorny task. What corruption “is” depends on “whose” corruption it is and who is describing it. The manner in which we see corruption is in large part a byproduct of our historical milieus and the narratives by which we are unsuspectedly being guided (Haller and Shore 2005). The unstated assumptions behind what cor-

ruption “is” are typically the best predictors of the conclusions the researcher eventually reaches or the policy solutions that are ultimately proposed (Anechiarico and Jacobs 1996; Philp 1997; Johnston 2001). Our scholarly objectivity is often corrupted, as it were, by our presuppositions. Understanding the nature of corruption remains a fundamental chore for most of the research in the area. It is a mission to which much of the recent research has been dedicated. Thus far and for the most part, quantitative approaches have been largely ineffective in terms of constructing representative and useful policy solutions; scholars are starting to suggest qualitative research as the more appropriate way of studying corruption (Menzel 2003; Doig 2011).

The research conducted by de Graaf and Huberts (2008) represents one such study. The scholars attempted to provide theoretically unconstrained understandings regarding public corruption in the Netherlands. In order to do so, the researchers employed a multiple case study design built on an explorative and inductive research strategy (Höffling 2002). They focused on a specific setting (Yin 2009) and sought to construct theory through propositions (Harris and Sutton 1986). Without making any assumptions about the nature of corruption, the scholars selected and studied in great depth 10 important Dutch corruption cases. They critically reviewed the 10 criminal files using the frameworks previously employed by Anechiarico and Jacobs (1996), Della Porta and Vannucci (1997), and Höffling (2002). Each examined file contained information such as taped telephone conversations, investigation reports, transcripts of interrogations,

and statements from witnesses. In addition to content analysis, the Dutch scholars also conducted 15 interviews with corresponding case detectives and their superiors. These interviews were completed with the purpose of gleaning insights into the personality of the accused administrators and to contextually place their behaviors.

The results of the de Graaf and Huberts’ (2008) study were extremely intriguing in a number of ways, not the least being that the suggested propositions, while dictated by context, were, as much as possible, free of theoretical preconceptions. Taken together, the propositions provided a valuable starting point that future research could build on. They did not constrain the researcher to a specific theoretical school nor to any assumptions about human nature. Yet, despite the numerous wonderful implications of the study, its impacts were limited in one significant way. Given that the study focused on context, the resulting propositions were restricted in their transferability to other environments. Would the discovered insights on the nature of public corruption in the Netherlands be useful for understanding public corruption in other countries? Would the suggested propositions be helpful in conceptualizing corruption in social matrices that are less experienced with democratic institutions? Would they provide a valuable framework for understanding corruption in countries where corruption is endemic, such as post-communist states?

The study discussed here was inspired and driven by such questions and considerations, in particular the latter one. Studying public corruption in the Re-

public of Moldova provided the opportunity to extend on the work of de Graaf and Huberts (2008) by examining their propositions within the context of a significantly different social matrix. Moldova represented a robust test to the propositions suggested by the Dutch scholars. Should their propositions be confirmed within the Moldovan environment, it would significantly add to our understandings of the nature of corruption. Most importantly, however, it would set the grounds for developing a much needed credible theoretical framework that would capture the nature of corruption in both traditionally democratic and newly democratized countries.

In studying Moldovan public corruption, the methodological approach employed by de Graaf and Huberts (2008) was, to the extent that it was possible, replicated. A total of 28 corruption cases were studied in detail following similar analysis frameworks employed by the Dutch scholars. The study, which lasted six months, used multiple data sources such as investigation files, court proceedings, publically available sources, and interviews with 33 knowledgeable informants. Seven informants were former or current anti-corruption agents and they were directly involved in many of the cases that were being examined. This sub-set of research collaborators was particularly helpful in navigating the case files and the procedural makeup of anti-corruption structures. The remaining informants were either business owners, journalists, or public officials. Case and interview data were transcribed, then iteratively reviewed and coded in an effort to construct triangulated profiles of corrupt public officials, their motivation for engaging in corruption, and the triggers of corrupt acts.

Although the research results were exciting in their own right, the methodological insights gained during this experience are, I believe, equally notable and many might find them quite useful. I make this claim mainly because I find that methodologically the study was remarkable in four meaningful ways. First, the study used the propositions developed by other researchers as a reference point. It was initiated with the unambiguous scope of scrutinizing the conclusions reached by others within a different social matrix. In qualitative research, such research designs are rather rare. Second, to a large extent, it adapted the methodological approach from the original study whose conclusions it sought to examine. Third, methodologically, the study combined content analysis with in-depth interviews with knowledgeable informants. The interviews served a number of purposes. They were used as a means of deconstructing the social setting in which corruption was defined. Furthermore, informants also acted as checkers of research interpretations. Given that some of the informants had intimate knowledge on the majority of the cases that were analyzed, they were well positioned to assume leading roles in the construal of the data. Hence, indirectly, some of the informants became active shapers of final interpretations. Finally, while the dangers of fieldwork in Moldova are not necessarily as great as it would be the case for research conducted in Russia or Ukraine, they are nevertheless just as real. The difference in the dangers faced by researchers working in these worlds is one of degree rather than of nature.

Now, with a clear understanding of the methodological details of the study and the motivation for

this article, the discussion turns to the actual insights and reflections from the research experience.

### Theoretical and Practical Insights

Qualitative research that embraces an interpretative turn is very much exploratory in nature (Liamputtong and Ezzy 2006; Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006). A great deal of its intellectual quality can be located within the reflexive paradigm that it imposes. Reflexivity, that is, reflection and recursion (Hibbert, Coupland, and MacIntosh 2010), calls for the researcher to recursively deconstruct one's own imagery and those of others in terms of the basic units of interpretation and then to reconstruct it all together with a complete appreciation for the extent of the constraints enforced by the taken-for-granted assumptions (Cunliffe 2002; 2003; 2004; Cunliffe and Jun 2005; Archer 2007). Above all, however, a reflexive turn provides the room for those being "researched" to become engaged participants in knowledge creation (Charmaz 2006; Hardy and Williams 2011) and, if they choose to do so, to assume leading roles in defining research (Hibbert, Coupland, and MacIntosh 2010).

There are certain techniques and "tricks" of the trade that researchers would be advised to embrace regardless of context (Becker 2008). Stories, for instance, appear to be wonderful discovery mechanisms that provide the informants with a roadmap, a security blanket, and an indirect incentive structure to assume ownership of the interpretations created during research (Hummel 1991; Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006). It is also worthwhile to develop, prior to engaging in fieldwork, an authentic

awareness of the depth of the effects that learned theoretical perspectives have on our interpretation angles, and to try to manage these impacts (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Lather 1986). In addition, the importance of being able to tolerate high levels of ambiguity (Patton 2002) and remaining open and ready for research serendipity (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006) can hardly be overstated. Notwithstanding these broad research norms, in most other cases, however, there is no instructional script. There are no strict sequential steps. The data are almost never "well-behaved." There are no labels that can conveniently dismiss complexity. There are no guarantees. The researcher has as much to learn about oneself as one has to learn about the worlds that one studies. One has to absorb and adapt to the conditions imposed by one's research setting. Every setting, however, is exceptional in its own way. So are the theoretical and practical insights that could be drawn from it. This, nonetheless, does not, I believe, reduce their usefulness.

### The Bias of Theoretical Preparation or Why a Bribe Is Not Always a Bribe

One would be hard pressed to underestimate the value of pre-fieldwork theoretical preparation. Indeed, even for the most "theoretically-unobstructed" research enterprises—groundwork is necessary and critical for success. Yet, theoretical homework also comes with the risk of imposing "theoretical blinders." To become convinced in seeing things one way is, as it were, to relinquish the right to see other things (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Lather 1986; Haller and Shore 2005). Scholars have noted that corruption research is particularly vulnerable and often

falls victim to trained preconceptions; corruption is often conceptualized as a problem of "the others," who more often than not are located outside of the modern world (Haller and Shore 2005; Roman 2012). Corruption, as some narratives might have it, is the sort of thing that happens to other, "less civilized," people.

When researching corruption, one should remain conscious and reflexively alert to the effects that habitual exposure to what otherwise might seem mundane narratives can have on one's ability to see. It is rarely safe to assume that rigorous training and preparation somehow magically enables us to know what "is" what we study and how these "others" react to it. A careless pre-conceptualization of a concept can be rather damaging to a study because it can easily turn the research into an unrepresentative course. In the Moldovan case, the constricting nature and the theoretical bias that can be imposed by one's previous training and the conceptualizations with which the researcher enters the setting were quickly exposed during two of the early interviews with informants.

**Informant:** Aren't you forgetting something?

**Researcher:** What?

**I:** Moldovans live in Moldova.

**R:** I am not sure that I am able to follow.

**I:** Moldovans are not Europeans. The fact that we are located in Europe does not make us Europeans. To be European is a special habit of mind. We are not like the Germans, the French, or the Italians. We think differently. That's the reason why none of the policies that the European Union makes us adopt will ever work. Such policies only work if the citizens have the right

mindset. For such policies to work in Moldova, the country would need to be populated by Europeans. European laws are designed for Europeans not for Moldovans...I think you have been away for so long that you have forgotten what it means to be a Moldovan. As a nation, we still suffer from a post-communist syndrome. It doesn't matter what laws or reforms are adopted, it will not solve corruption. Corruption is in our genes. Laws don't make a system work. People do. To change a system you need to change the people first.

**R:** Corruption is typically defined as acting or failing to act as a result of receiving personal rewards from interested third parties.

**I:** That sounds nice. But, what does it really mean?

**R:** It means that a public administrator is corrupt when he or she does something or doesn't do something because somebody paid him or her, or because he or she might receive certain personal benefits from behaving a certain way or making certain decisions that are beneficial for someone else, a third party.

**I:** Well, what about rookie economic inspectors who are told to "collect" for their bosses or otherwise will lose their jobs? In the beginning, they don't get anything. They just collect. They have no power. Are they corrupt or not? It's not that simple...you see. You assume that state workers decide on their own whether to take a bribe or not. It is not all the time like that. Sometimes the system makes them do the things that they do. Sometimes they do it for someone else. It is not always clear what corruption is or who is corrupt. Sometimes a bribe is not really a bribe. When you pay a bribe to have the state worker do something that he is required to do by law, but he is not going to do it until you pay him under the table—is that really

a bribe? Is that corruption or is that something else? In Europe or America, it's probably easier to say who is corrupt and who isn't. In Moldova, it is different...totally different.

In established democracies, in which public corruption is typically harshly condemned, at least within politically convenient narratives, linking bribing to corruption fits comfortably within most logical and theoretical frameworks. One might even assume that the concept of bribing could serve as an appropriate starting point for preparatory research conceptualizations. Yet, while bribing and corruption often do go hand in hand—there is much of the latter that the former does not capture. Unassumingly linking the two might significantly simplify the research task, nevertheless, it would also deprive the researcher of representative and fundamental understandings of the nature of what was being studied. In fact, every one of the 33 Moldovan informants admitted that they have at one point in time over their careers given or received a bribe. Every single one of them, however, also vehemently refused to label themselves or their actions as corrupt.

The two interview extracts make clear the serious impacts that carrying preconceived theoretical assumptions into the field setting might have on the quality of the research. Even what might otherwise be considered as a basic and inconsequential association, such as the one between bribing and corruption, can be thoroughly unreliable for a given social matrix. Being an "insider," by means of social and ethnical association, does not grant immunity from theoretically blinding preconception. At least within this context, an "insider" has no advantage over

an "outsider," as one is just as likely to fall for the conceptual traps set by theoretical blinders.

The scope of qualitative research is to uncover constructions and meanings within the stories as they are told by those populating a given social space, not as they are seen by the researcher. The differences are subtle, but still meaningful. The researchers, especially those operating in spaces such as those of post-communist societies, need to be prepared to realize the faults in the stubbornness of their own theoretical habits and to develop an ability to challenge, as needed, their theoretical predispositions.

#### **Access to Data or Why "Otherwise" Publicly Available Data Is Rarely Public or Available**

For those of us trained to operate within the frameworks of functional democracies, the concept of "public," specifically of something being "publically available," is sensibly different from the meaning that it carries in other social matrices. Out of practical considerations, researchers will be well-served by a quick realization that in the post-Soviet space, "publically available" does not always mean that something is available to the public. Not everything, in fact very little, that is officially labeled as public information is actually available to the extent that is stated by the officially embraced narrative. Accessing sensitive data or setting within the post-communist worlds is almost impossible without gaining the support of key gatekeepers. Even what otherwise might appear to be uncontroversial information, such as demographic or social statistics, is often difficult to access and can remain out of reach (Belousov et al. 2007).

Data on Moldovan public corruption, which are legislatively mandated as available for public access, like any respectable data, have their gatekeepers. If the researcher fails to recruit a gatekeeper as an informant and does not secure permission for access, data, despite their label as "publically available," will most likely remain inaccessible. Restraining access to data to a select privileged few, regardless of the actual nature of the guarded data, appears to be a trait of many of the post-Soviet societies (Karklins 2005). In these societies, power and access to information hang together. It would be wise for researchers planning to conduct studies in post-communist spaces to relieve themselves of any predeterminations about accessing data sites in a "typical" manner or without recruiting a gatekeeper. Official requests or cold-calling will normally fail to provide the researcher with access. Only powerful people will. Such individuals, however, rarely respond to emails or phone calls from unfamiliar names. One would have to connect with them via a third party or by meeting the gatekeeper in person at a formal event. Access, as it was the case with the Moldovan study, is more likely to be unexpectedly secured at a Christmas party in a conversation over a glass of wine than by a continuous submission of official requests for research.

There are at least two important lessons that should be drawn here. First, the researcher should seldom assume that "public data" are accessible before checking the realities of data access on sites. In this sense, a pre-study visit can be rather beneficial in terms of instilling the researcher with much needed "access realism." This would be particularly useful if the researcher has made a significant financial or

career investment in the project. Second, gatekeepers, more often than not, have an extensive and active agenda. In post-communist countries, it is highly unlikely that access to data will be granted if such an action would not address some point on the gatekeeper's agenda. A trade of favors will be "there" to be made. The researcher should be aware of this condition and should make sure not to force oneself into anything that would later question one's ethical standing. The slope can get very slippery, very quickly.

### **Accounting for Social Specificities or Why Institutional Labels Do Not Matter**

In the post-Soviet space, police and anti-corruption agencies are mechanisms of power. Having been granted a license to force, they are important tools of managing national influence. Judicial courts, too, are power structures maintaining established interests first, and everything else, including upholding the law, second. In countries with systemic corruption, institutions do not function as they were envisioned by their legislative design. Quite the opposite, the institutions entrusted with implementing anti-corruption measures are usually the power brokers who stand to gain the most from a continued endemic corruption. Within the former Soviet bloc, the very institutions that have a formal mission of fighting corruption are the ones making the ranks of the worst offenders (see: Karklins 2005). The following statements by informants, all anti-corruption agents, capture the condition rather vividly.

The truth is that the economic police [a leading anti-corruption agency] is probably the most corrupt

of them all. As an institution, it has no interest in actually fighting corruption. So many agents live off it that there is no interest in doing anything about it. They wouldn't know what to do without it. They have been corrupt for such a long time that it makes perfect sense to them. They don't see any reason why things should be any different. Why do you think that everyone wants to get a job here? It's not like we pay well...People are willing to pay three, four, or even five thousand Euros just to get an inspector job here. They might only be able to keep the job for a year, but in that time, they could make tens of thousands.

It is hard to argue that what we do is actually fighting corruption. Yes, we do catch a few public officials who might take a bribe from time to time. However, in the entire time I have been here, seven years, we never went after someone big unless it was a political order. The real corruption is untouchable. The only time we get a big fish is when they tussle between each other. Someone gets greedy and decides not to split things with others up top. That's really the only time when we are permitted to go after big names.

There are numerous blatant instances when owners are being outmuscled out of their businesses by criminal, politically connected networks. Sometimes they will try to make it look legit by paying them a little, other times, they will just buy them a plane ticket and give them two weeks to emigrate. We know about those cases very well. Everybody does. There is nothing we can do. We are not allowed to investigate or interfere. Our boss operates under strict rules. The owners will not get anywhere by going to court either. They know it, so they don't even try it.

Realizing the vastly differing institutional identity of public agencies, the anti-corruption agencies in this case, in societies that suffer from chronic corruption, poses serious methodological challenges. This means that a study's research design cannot rely on institutions to be "well-behaved" or "label conscious." In such instances, the researcher has to account for this condition and adjust one's interpretations accordingly. When studying institutions in established democracies, scholars might assume the liberty of accepting that institutions are, as it were, who they claim to be. This is seldom, if ever, an assumption that can be made when exploring topics within societies with little democratic traditions. There is usually a significant gap between formally upheld institutional narratives and actual institutional practices.

Furthermore, the researcher can no longer take the quality of the data provided by local institutions for granted. The nature of the written data, in particular, becomes a prime suspect for a critical review. In the Moldovan study, for instance, it became clear that there was a common pattern in the nature of prosecuted cases. Unlike the Dutch study, only two cases could have been labeled as "important." In fact, none of the cases was deserving of the qualification of "political or elite corruption," which generally refers to corruption at the highest structural levels. This deeply conflicted with the imagery delineated by the informants. While this represents significant realization in its own right for the purpose of this discussion, there is another matter that is important to note. Specifically, when examining the transferability of propositions developed within social spaces with time-honored institutions

to other social matrices in which institutions seriously deviate from their legislative mandates—the researcher should account for the impact that this has on the quality and social biases in the available data. Otherwise, propositions might be erroneously confirmed or disregarded as a result of the nature of the data rather than due to their actual merits. This is no easy task. Yet, in any partially confirmatory research, it is critical that the limitations of data are not what dictates the final interpretations. The researcher should always remain aware that data quality is not immune to social contexts. Like everything else, all data have their stories.

### **Trust and Familiarity With the Researcher or How to Avoid Empty Stories**

In many instances, interviews, qualitative research in general, can be equated with intrusions in the lives of others. While such interventions are usually well-organized and their disturbances are kept to a minimum, it still does not change their nature. During interviews, especially on delicate topics, researchers become, even if temporary, trusted inhabitants of the emotional and social space of their informants (Liamputtong and Ezzy 2006; Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006). This is what makes qualitative research so effective. This is also what makes this type of research somewhat unique (Dickson-Swift et al. 2007).

In order for the researcher to become entrusted with representative information, one would have to build strong rapports of trust with the informants (Ceglowski 2000; Liamputtong and Ezzy 2006; Dickson-Swift et al. 2007; Minichiello, Aroni, and Hays

2008). Some (Ribbens and Edwards 1998; Stanley and Wise 2002) have even suggested that qualitative research demands the development of relationships of reciprocity in which the researcher attempts to offer participants as much as they are receiving back. In order to become fully engaged in the scope of the research, contributors need to feel that they are not being used nor manipulated. They also need to feel confident that the researcher will recognize and appreciate the true value of their stories. Above all, the researcher needs to remain honest and human (Dickson-Swift et al. 2007). Informants are not likely to share with the researcher their genuine emotions, personal stories nor incriminating actions outside of trust relationships (Rubin and Rubin 2012). Data quality, as a result, is in large part a function of the degree to which the researcher manages to establish, operate, and sustain such rapports. When fully successful, the researcher will benefit from having the informant talk free of fears that he or she will be misunderstood, judged, or betrayed. The researcher will be perceived as an insider, or sympathetic outsider, who can understand and can be trusted. Obviously, such great levels of trust impose great responsibility on the researcher, as many of the stories, especially when revealing acts of corruption, can be quite damaging to one's career.

While in established democracies expertise, professional associations, and publication records can often be sufficient to legitimize the researcher and kick off a trust rapport, even on sensitive issues (see: Enguix 2014), in many post-communist societies, this is rarely the case. In these worlds, individuals habitually demonstrate a trained cynicism and distrust towards any systematized inquiry into any im-

portant social issues. Belousov and colleagues (2007) have argued that in locations where corruption and organized crime are pervasive to the extent that they can lead to the notable loss of social order, termed "risk-saturated areas," building and maintaining trust with informants is extremely challenging. Individuals are decidedly unwilling to dedicate their time and even less willing to risk their livelihood for purposes of research. In these environments, networks of associations are critical for purposes of establishing trust. For trivial, non-threatening research topics, trust could conceivably be developed fairly easy even outside direct endorsements from a member of one's immediate networks of association. For sensitive issues, however, this is merely impossible. Trust, professional authority, and neutrality, most of which are typically implicitly assumed in other social matrices, in post-Soviet spaces, have to be continuously negotiated.

In the Moldovan study, all those who accepted to be interviewed were personally familiar with the researcher or have received a positive endorsement from someone they trusted. In all instances when the researcher was not acquainted with the informant before the start of the research, it took a direct contact from another informant to confirm the identity and intentions of the researcher. Without such communication there were only limited chances that the potential research participants would have agreed to participate. In a number of cases, such contacts were interpreted as favor seeking. Initially, informants would accept to participate not for the sake of the research nor because they were contacted by the researcher directly, but as a favor to those endorsing the researcher. To this extent, then, it would

be rather unfair to call this approach a network or snowball technique, even though, strictly speaking, the approach did fit the conceptual description of the sampling method. In reality, it would be perhaps more appropriate to describe the approach as a chain-endorsement.

The importance of establishing a trust rapport with the Moldovan informants was even more critical given the amount of "empty stories" that is characteristic for corruption research. In the beginning, a number of informants were keen on distancing themselves from the stories they were telling. They rarely were the protagonists of those stories and their stories rarely deviated from the standard narrative of the "good" citizen. These stories, outside the intriguing motives behind their emptiness, provided very little in terms of authentic or valuable insights. What is of import here, for those undertaking research in similar environments and under comparable conditions, is that the cynicism and apathy of the citizens who inhabit such social systems will make empty stories predominant. Without developing considerable levels of trust, the quality of the interviews will be quite poor. In this sense, it is advisable that the researcher dedicate more time to trust-building than actual interviewing.

Somewhat surprisingly, since domestic institutions are not trusted and are perceived incompetent and corrupt—professionally associating with them might actually be detrimental to the trust-building efforts and overall research. Such associations might in fact increase levels of distrust and lead informants to question the true motives behind the study. Furthermore, own institutional biases could

significantly guide informants' stories. Under these circumstances, links with Western institutions are valuable assets. In the Moldovan case, the researcher's affiliation with a respected American university and research center helped significantly with establishing trust. In many ways, for the majority of the informants, associations with Western institutions topped national commonalities as a driving criteria for trust.

**I:** In all honesty, I wasn't too sure about talking to you in the beginning.

**R:** Why, if you don't mind me asking?

**I:** I wasn't sure about what you are really trying to do. I didn't know if you wanted to do research or just used that as an excuse for something else. You never know nowadays. All kinds of things happen all the time.

**R:** What helped you make up your mind?

**I:** Well, my pal asked me to talk to you, plus you don't work for any of the national agencies or universities. I figured if you are doing this for an American university, you have to be an authentic researcher. You are not going to lie to me or waste my time. Actually, if you were doing this for any of the Moldovan universities, I probably wouldn't have bothered with you.

### Gender and Decor

Gender is another important factor in conditioning trust within the informant-researcher relationships. Numerous scholars have noted one's personal characteristics and demographic associations as a fundamental variable that guides the interactions and trust with informants while in the field and the eventual quality of the procured data (see: Brandes

2008; Li 2008; Mazzei and O'Brien 2009; Enguix 2014). Some have suggested that gender might trump even ethnicity in terms of relevancy for building associations in fieldwork (Stanley and Slattery 2003). The post-Soviet contexts do not significantly deviate from this general expectation. Most of these societies are still heavily male dominated. Elite economic and social positions remain by and large the domain of men and out of the reach of women. "Serious" science, too, is something that "men do," or at least it is still predominantly perceived as such. For the study of corruption in post-communist societies, gender is critical. In these environments, on questions of corruption, male researchers might find it significantly easier to negotiate standing and trust with one's informants. Female researchers would face a harder task in convincing of their expertise and conditioning genuine participation from elite economic and social players. Adams (1999), for instance, noted that, as a female foreign researcher among Uzbekistan elites, she felt like a "pet" researcher adopted by powerful interests. In these male dominated social matrices, female researchers studying corruption will also have to add social biases and preconceptions to the long list of existing research challenges. The following dialogue, notwithstanding the numerous other themes that it carries, is a case in point.

**R:** I couldn't help noticing that most of the agents [anti-corruption agents] are male. Am I reading too much into it?

**I:** Actually, all of our field agents are men. Women are not made for such type of work.

**R:** What do you mean?

**I:** They just aren't. I don't know how to explain it. Cor-

ruption is not really a women's sport. How many female academics do you know that study corruption?

**R:** Well, in fact, a number of them are women.

**I:** Not many, though, right? Nobody around here would take a woman agent or a woman academic studying corruption seriously. It probably works in the West. Here, such things do not hold water.

And, while there is no shortage of research that reviews the impacts of demographic characteristics on the quality of informant-researcher relationships, there is little acknowledgement of the dress code as a significant determinant in creating a trust rapport. For many post-communist societies, which have suffered through decades of economic hardships and uniformization, wardrobe is an expression of economic standing. Labels are social status currency. This should not come as a surprise, especially when dealing with high ranking officials or social elites in economically weak societies. The fact that the "label veneration" can be easily explained away, however, does not make it of lesser significance. Individuals' statuses are often estimated by their wardrobe and their shoes. As amusing as this might come across for a Western researcher, this is by no means trivial. Given that, in many instances, the researcher working in these worlds has only a few minutes to negotiate standing, one's wardrobe can be the difference between a short interview mired with empty stories and the chance to enlist the respondent as an active participant in knowledge creation. When interviewing in post-communist societies, interview wardrobes, like words, are powerful discovery and negotiation mechanisms; hence, should be chosen and balanced with care depending on the research question or the population being explored.

### Interview Location

Interviews represent one of the foundational tools for qualitative research (Rubin and Rubin 2012). Interviewing, by its very nature, has a number of advantages. First, control over the flow of the conversation is in large part at the discretion of the researcher. During the course of the interview, the researcher maintains the right to re-envision the research as unexpected dimensions are uncovered. Second, interviews, in particular a string of in-depth ones, provide informants with the ability to become active participants in research. Through their stories, depending on the specifications installed by the researcher, respondents can become integral and consequential parts of the interpretation process; especially when they have extensive and relevant experiences (Charmaz 2006; Hardy and Williams 2011). Additionally, during interviews, informants' statements are just one source of information. Reactions, body language, and tone are as much a source of information as spoken words (Rubin and Rubin 2012). Finally, interviews are somewhat less susceptible to biases inadvertently introduced by researcher's previous academic training as the researcher has the opportunity to check one's own interpretations during subsequent interview sessions. The benefits that come with the flexibility of interviewing cannot be maximized, however, without thorough and rigorous planning (Rubin and Rubin 2012). For that purpose, the selection of the interview location becomes one of the most central considerations. This is particularly true when conducting interviews on sensitive issues. It is important that informants find the interview locations both comfortable and inviting in terms of conversation. Providing informants

with the choice of interview location is perhaps among the better ways of ensuring a positive start to the research relationship. Securing a neutral location (e.g., renting office space, access to a classroom after hours) is critical for securing a higher acceptance rate among potential research participants. For some, especially when it comes to problematic issues, interviewing can be almost therapeutic (Birch and Miller 2000; Dickson-Swift et al. 2006), which makes the selection of the location much more fundamental.

In the Moldovan case, only in seven instances the informants preferred to be interviewed at their work places. On nine occasions the respondents expressed preference to be interviewed in the location that was secured by the researcher, while the rest of the informants suggested a third location, which was usually a quiet coffee shop or restaurant. The location of the interviews had a significant effect on the formality of the interaction (at least in the beginning) and the time it took for respondents to "start producing" meaningful insights. Informants, in particular those who were public officials, who were interviewed in their work places were more likely to cautiously place their statements within broad storylines that were derivatives of "correct" political narratives, which, as public servants, they were expected to embrace. They were less likely to provide thick descriptions or to support their perspectives with concrete examples. It was much harder to motivate the informants to assume a genuinely active role as a research participants. These interviews were characterized by high proportions of empty stories. The *ad hoc* locations, on the other hand, appeared to be the most effective in terms of

stimulating results. Informants interviewed in coffee shops or restaurants were much more likely to embrace their roles as active research participants and knowledge producers. They appeared to grant themselves much more freedoms in storytelling and they also seemed to exhibit increased levels of trust. They were also more likely to offer and to agree to be contacted at a later date for member checking.

### Emotional Burden

The rights and well-being of research participants have been, for obvious reasons, a central concern for much of qualitative research literature (Lee-Treweek and Linkogle 2000). The lives of those who inform research are highly regarded and no efforts are spared to protect them from any, even indirect, negative effects. The impact that the research has on the safety and welfare of those standing on the other end, the researchers themselves, is usually an afterthought or at the very least pales in comparison (Kinard 1996; Lee-Treweek and Linkogle 2000; Johnson and Clarke 2003; Rager 2005; Belousov et al. 2007; Dickson-Swift et al. 2007; Campbell 2013). Qualitative research, during which the researcher engages in face-to-face intimate contact with sensitive issues, can be quite trying and can impose significant emotional burdens (Darlington and Scott 2002; Gair 2002; Harris 2002; Melrose 2002; Warr 2004). In qualitative research, the researcher is routinely exposed to stories of suffering and social injustice (Morse and Field 1995) that can “break one’s heart” (Rager 2005). Given a “tin-opener effect” (Etherington 1996), informants will often reveal some of their most painful experiences, heaviest disappointments, or most guarded secrets. In this

sense, the researcher becomes a “secret keeper” (Dickson-Swift et al. 2007) who now carries the confessions of others (Lupton 1998). Training, although useful, can never fully deny that the researcher is a human being first and a scholar second. The two roles, I believe, cannot, nor should they, be clearly separated; hence, the inevitable emotional encumbrance.

Research on public corruption makes no exception. It is an area that will provide ample opportunities to experience unethical behaviors and social injustice at its finest. A case in point is the story on fabricated criminal dossiers shared by one of the informants, an anti-corruption agent.

**R:** So, if I understand this correctly, you are saying that corruption charges can be fabricated?

**I:** Yes. That’s exactly what I am saying. We can manufacture a dossier very easily.

**R:** Why would you do that?

**I:** It’s politics. It’s about power and power games. Sometimes, someone might try to remove a clean public official from office. If they have nothing on him, the only way to do it is by fabricating stuff. Sometimes they set the guy up, while in other cases, they just get testimonies from a few credible witnesses. And it doesn’t have to be elected officials. Business partners do this to each other all the time.

**R:** Have you ever done it?

**I:** Yes. Twice.

**R:** Can you tell me more about it?

**I:** It was something that came from the top. In one case, we were asked to put together a dossier for a party leader and in another case for a mayor from Up North.

**R:** What happened to them?

**I:** One got a few years [in prison], the other one worked out a deal. I think he immigrated to Canada since.

As the dialogue reveals, careers, lives, and families are unsettled with ease and without remorse. In the scheme of things, in a systematically corrupt social matrix, a non-corrupt individual is a nuisance. One, who makes others uncomfortable. One, who needs to be removed. This represents a painful reality of abiding in a social system that has institutionalized corruption. There is limited respect for the law and even lesser value placed on individual rights and dignity. Realizing the depth and the extent of the social injustice imposes great emotional distress on the researcher. With every additional interview the degree of the emotional burden simply rises. The latter is further exacerbated by the realization that there is truly very little that the researcher can do outside of listening and retelling the stories. While one can attempt to embrace a detached perspective, eventually, feelings of anger, disbelief, and helplessness can hardly be avoided; especially for one who might feel as an insider based on national origin.

On the whole, one simply cannot expect that the study on corruption, human life in general, will not involve emotions. Qualitative research is in many ways an emotionally intensive endeavor. The emotional demands can often prove to be difficult to handle. Outside of being difficult to cope with, such states of mind could also negatively impact the quality of the research. Although with time the researcher could become desensitized and pain and social injustice could become “normal” (see: Morgan and Krone 2001; Campbell 2013), there are no

proven techniques that would fully prepare one for the effects of exposure to suffering and social injustice. Consequently, researchers should develop and nurture a realistic appreciation for the emotional demands associated with certain types of research and fieldwork. They should attempt to assess the impacts the research might have on them and their ability to sustain the related emotional burden long-term (Kinard 1996). In qualitative research on difficult social issues, both the researcher’s welfare and the quality of one’s research often ride on the researcher’s ability to manage emotions (Rubin and Rubin 2012).

### Physical Dangers

Somewhat surprisingly, there is only a small body of literature that examines the physical dangers of fieldwork. Although most forms and areas of qualitative research entail some level of risk, certain study areas, such as corruption, tend to be characterized by higher degrees of physical dangers. It has been argued that fieldwork has become increasingly dangerous and scholars are often faced with extreme situations that can easily progress into conditions that can lead to physical harm (Kovats-Bernat 2002). The post-Soviet spaces, with their weak administrative structures that easily succumb under the pressures of corruption, appear to be particularly prone to such challenges (see: Belousov et al. 2007; Morgan, Maguire, and Reiner 2012). In these settings, few, if any, of the protagonists of the power game will jeopardize disturbing the existent balance by allowing lucrative corrupt structures to be exposed. Any prospect of being unmasked will be guarded against and if necessary—neutralized.



The physical hazards of qualitative research do not stop with the exit from the setting. Such challenges might linger around for some time. Publicizing the results might become another trigger point for risk. This is particularly true for corruption studies. Such research is characterized by high probabilities of exposing matters that might unsettle certain well-established interests or narratives. While the actual research activity might go by unnoticed, the results, if they are sufficiently powerful to stir public outcry, might raise some challenges for the researcher, especially if one continues to operate in the same environment. One of the informants, a journalist, sounded the following warning during one of the interviews.

For your own good, you better make sure that you don't publicize too much of your findings, at least not in any of the local papers. They don't play around with this here. Especially if you plan on naming names. They might let you slide on a few things, but if you start talking too much, they will definitely pay your family a visit. The hammer and sickle [traditional Soviet emblems] might not figure on the flag any longer, but that does not mean that they have changed their ways. They still come down hard when they have to do so. The system is as operational as it has ever been. It has simply moved into the shadows. But, it is still there. Working hard. Make no mistake about it.

While not all research in dangerous settings will necessarily lead to dramatic developments or physical threats, in fact very few might, researchers engaged in fieldwork within hazardous zones should still realize that this remains a real possibility.

Above all, however, researchers, especially those working alone, should acknowledge that outside of their own instincts they have little formal protection to rely on. In the game of balancing powerful interests, the rights and welfare of a social researcher are not necessarily strong considerations. For a researcher, then, it becomes critical to develop clear and pragmatic risk assessments before entering fieldwork, but also coping strategies, exit tactics, and habits for recognizing and responding to possible danger triggering situations (see: Sluka 1995; Kovats-Bernat 2002; Belousov et al. 2007).

### **A Few Concluding Remarks**

The appeal of qualitative research lies in its ability to provide cursive, occasionally complete understandings of issues that do not easily lend themselves to mass study. Qualitative inquiry perspectives and approaches often charm with their delightful common sense. The latter might even lead some to believe that there is less rigor in qualitative than there is in quantitative studies. This is obviously not the case. On the contrary, qualitative research demands an equal, sometimes even greater, amount of rigorous preparation. One should not be misled by the elegant role played by serendipity and the free-flowing of the unexpected within the narrative of the final product. To some extent, it takes more effort and groundwork to manage the unplanned than to follow a meticulous and predetermined script. Unlike quantitative based inquiries, qualitative research cannot afford the luxury of assuming that concepts can be easily defined and captured through precise measurements. There are also no rules of thumb, nor proxies, nor well-behaved decision trees, nor

software, which would confirm significance and bless generalizations.

Within its philosophical foundation, interpretive research is not set on imposing strict theoretical borders on research inquiries. Previous academic endorsements, while valued, are not ultimate determinants of research designs nor irreplaceable judgments of quality. Fieldwork is fluent and involves continuous negotiation of positions and relationships (Goffman 1989). Every research experience is unique in its own way. Yet, there are manifold commonalities among experiences which offer many opportunities for learning and extending general methodological understandings. It is the latter belief that has guided me in the writing of this article. Although some of the suggestions that I have made have already previously been echoed in the literature, others are partly original and that have yet to be formulated within the specific focus chosen here. This is not to say that my insights are somehow more complete or more useful than those of others. The degree of their completeness and usefulness is for the most part a function of the similarities within research contexts. They do not provide any universal magic of applicability and their transferability should be understood within the appropriate levels of methodological realism.

The suggestions provided here follow a similar logic and fall in line with the works of a number of other scholars (see: Johnson and Clarke 2003; Belousov et al. 2007; Dickson-Swift et al. 2007; Campbell 2013; Enguix 2014) who have attempted to delineate the challenges, both technical and psychological, that are faced by researchers engaged in qualitative re-

search. Unlike other discussions, this article focuses specifically on studying public corruption within social matrices that are only starting to experience democratic governance. Both, the article's strengths and its weaknesses, can be located within its focus. On the one hand, there has been very little written about the challenges of fieldwork on public corruption, in this sense, then, this discussion has much to say. On the other hand, researchers who are not interested in the subject matter and might not be particularly inclined to study post-Soviet worlds, might find the representatives of what is discussed here rather limited. If nothing else, then, this article represents an additional documentary of the practical challenges encountered in the fieldwork.

Rather than suggesting avenues for future research, I use this final paragraph to offer a professional warning. We should not forget that as scholars, who engage in qualitative research, we sometimes are privileged to be entrusted with personal and highly sensitive information (Cannon 2005; Rubin and Rubin 2012). It is quite understandable, then, why we would often feel a deep sense of gratitude to our informants (Liamputtong Rice and Ezzy 1999). At the same time, however, we need to realize the emotional burden that we assume when routinely faced with stories of pain and social injustice. Fieldwork entails entering a space of emotions and vulnerability. In certain cases, emotional burdens can easily exceed the limits that we originally predicted and expected. Little can prepare one for the realities of the field. Paradoxically, the difficulty of dealing with emotions might have to do more with us than with our research. Engaging in qualitative research on sensitive issues offers us the possibility

to learn about ourselves. In qualitative face-to-face research, self-exploration and reflexivity are, for the most part, unavoidable. Reflexivity, by its very nature, places the researcher in a position of having to occasionally, sometimes continuously, re-negotiate one's own moral standings, imagery, and even identity. Reflexivity is not only methodologically tough, it can also impose a heavy emotional toll. Furthermore, the attachments we develop, but also the feelings and exposures during our research, can affect our lives in more ways than we could ever imagine before entering our fieldwork (see: Jamieson 2000; Rosenblatt 2001). To this extent, then, out of consid-

eration for our well-being, we always must maintain a healthy appreciation of the degree to which our research can change us and to develop the habit of assuming at least a partially-defensive approach to our engagement in fieldwork. From a literature perspective, there continues to be an obvious need for an extended, fieldwork-based discussion on the ethical, psychological, and physical implications of engaging in qualitative research. Given that qualitative methodologies have become an integral part of research in social sciences, it is only reasonable to expect that our understandings of the risks and challenges associated with them do the same.

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