

Chapter 5

Studying the Military: Unlocking a Closed Organization



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1 Introduction

The study of military-related issues is not a recent phenomenon. Throughout history, scholars have delved into the intricacies of warfare, seeking to understand its causes and consequences. The inherent contradictions of political power and the disputed borders that serve as its realm have fueled the use of war as a central instrument and foundation of authority. However, our approach has always been more modest. As social scientists, specifically a sociologist (Rut Diamint) and a political scientist (Rafa Martínez), our focus diverges from that of historians. Coming from different backgrounds, with the first of us hailing from Argentina and the second from Spain, both our countries have experienced prolonged and painful military-led authoritarian regimes, our interest lies not in historiographical narratives or political power struggles that culminate in armed conflict. Instead, we are captivated by the military as an entity and its implications in various contexts.

Specifically, our research has focused for years on how to ensure that the military relinquishes political power and becomes an administrative tool at the service of any democratic government. This is important because, even with the expansion of democracy, various practices, norms, discourses, and behaviors have remained tinged with militarism. As researchers, we have also been interested in what the military institution is like and in analyzing whether the members of the military are primarily characterized by a vocational or by an institutional profile, among other aspects. In recent years, elements such as international missions have aroused our interest. Recent changes in the international political system have led us also to look

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ahead to the future of the Armed Forces and to analyze the marked trend toward multitasking.

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze the challenges associated with studying defense issues and to share our experiences and the obstacles we encountered while examining the military question in Latin America and Spain. Despite not having collaborated on joint research before, we are familiar with each other's work and have gained valuable insights from each other's achievements and setbacks. Rut Diamint began her interaction with and study of the military during the 1980s, amidst the third wave of democratization in the region. Throughout this period, she actively participated in numerous seminars, conferences, and meetings alongside fellow academics, diplomats, defense officials, and military personnel from democratic countries. Together, they sought to navigate this delicate journey, particularly in the aftermath of military dictatorships, and find a path forward. This vast experience was of great use to her and led to her collaborating with Argentine defense ministers in the early 1990s (as advisor, 1993–1995), and then in the first decade of the twenty-first century (chief of staff, 2003–2005).

In 2002, the Argentine army contracted a public opinion polling company to conduct a sociological analysis of its members in connection with the shift from compulsory to voluntary military service. The company shared the data with Rut on the condition that they not be made public. Thanks to these data, she was able to obtain information about a broad population of military personnel; specifically, this involved a self-administered survey of a representative sample of Argentine Army cadre personnel (6000 cases), a survey of a panel of opinion leaders (240 interviews), and a survey aimed at a nationally representative sample of public opinion (1278 cases). The most striking fact was the social class of the new officers and non-commissioned officers, which showed a decline in the socio-economic level of military members. No other similar studies were carried out in the rest of Latin America, or at least there is no public record of any such studies.

Due to the limitations of conducting direct fieldwork, she undertook a project aimed at training civilians in defense subjects. With the support of the Ford Foundation, three workshops were organized to provide training to Latin American civilians in defense matters. These workshops were conducted in different regions, including Mexico and Central America, the Andean Region, and the Southern Cone (Diamint, 1999). In addition to this project, she also collaborated with NDI (Partnership for Democratic Governance and Security) on another initiative. The objectives of these projects were to analyze the knowledge requirements for civilians in security issues, provide training to parliamentary and party leaders in security oversight, and study defense policy budgeting and management. Her doctoral thesis from 2013, titled "*La política de defensa argentina en democracia: juridicidad y desmilitarización*" (Argentine Defense Policy in Democracy: Legality and Demilitarization), further contributed to her specialization in this field. Her expertise was also enhanced through her roles as an adviser (1993–1995) and Chief of Cabinet (2004–2005) at the Ministry of Defense of Argentina.

Rafa Martínez embarked on his research on the military at the dawn of the twenty-first century with a groundbreaking survey. This survey involved collecting

data from 2500 students of the 32 military training centers for officers and non-commissioned officers in Spain's three armies (Army, Navy, and Air Force) and the common defense corps (military corps that are shared by all the branches of the Spanish Armed Forces providing specific professional expertise: legal assistance, audit and accountability, medical personnel, and military bands). It was a unique opportunity. The project was funded by the recently established "General Gutiérrez Mellado" University Institute (1997) as part of an agreement set up by the Spanish Ministry of Defense and the National University of Distance Education (UNED). Taking advantage of the significant research funding available at the institute during that time, Rafa adopted a daring approach by seeking permission to access all military academies and conducting surveys among the cadets. This request was deemed impossible, but it turned out to be a catalyst for an eye-opening journey. When years later, Rafa asked an relevant admiral about why they obtained that grant, the response shed light on their decision: -Because no one had ever asked for anything like that before. This valuable lesson taught Rafa not to limit himself as long as his approach was scientifically sound. Ultimately, in 2007, this project's findings came to fruition with the publication of his work (Martínez, 2007), marking the culmination of an exciting journey filled with both rewarding and disappointing experiences.

A presentation of this work in Baltimore (USA) at the Inter-University Seminar (IUS) on Armed Forces and Society led him to Giuseppe Caforio and the European Research Group on Military and Society (ERGOMAS). The initial collaboration involved comparing the census survey in Spanish academies with sample data of cadets from a contemporary study of the ERGOMAS military profession working group (Caforio & Martínez, 2005). This collaboration resulted in three research projects involving 13, 9, and 8 countries, respectively. The first project encompassed the administration of over 3000 questionnaires to future civilian and military elites; surveying first- and final-year students of the military academies of the three armies; and first- and final-year students of the three university bachelor degrees held by the largest number of ministers, namely, Law, Economics, and Political Science. Additionally, almost a hundred in-depth interviews were conducted with military, political, business, journalistic, and academic elites (Caforio, 2007). The second project involved conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews with more than 500 soldiers and non-commissioned officers, focusing on their involvement in asymmetric warfare (Caforio, 2013). This was complemented by a further survey in which we again conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews on the same topic with 250 senior commanders and generals (Nunciari & Olivetta, 2021).

In 2010, Narcís Serra, former vice-president and defense minister of the Spanish government (who would later prove to be a key gatekeeper) put Rafa in contact with Rut and the entire Latin American Security and Defence Network (RESDAL). The objective of that approach was to contact the governments of the Southern Cone of Latin America and to replicate the study that had been previously conducted in Spanish military academies in Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, and Brazil. However, when the project was about to start, the defense minister of one of those countries was removed from office, resulting in the project falling apart after six months of preparation. Despite the setback, the negotiations with those ministers and their

respective staff provided valuable insights and lessons for future initiatives on how to negotiate with the gatekeepers and access the field.

The latest research project in this area is “Rethinking the role of the Armed Forces in the face of new security challenges” (REPENFAS21), which Rafa has been leading since 2019. The project is funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation and aims to analyze how the Spanish Armed Forces should adapt to address the redefined risks and threats to security in both Spain and Europe. As part of the project, a total of 60 members of the political, economic, and military elites were interviewed. This included surveying almost 100 colonels undergoing their course to become generals, as well as engaging with the defense committees of the Spanish Congress and Senate.

The results were discussed in three dedicated workshops involving 21 experts from various backgrounds (academics, journalists, consultants, and politicians). Each workshop had seven participants. Additionally, a Delphi method questionnaire was administered to gather insights from an additional 30 experts. Although not strictly research work, the recent fieldwork experience with military personnel was the culmination of years of studies and research. In March 2023, Rafa was appointed as an expert consultant to the United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS). His role involved conducting workshops on security system reform. While the experience was highly valuable, unfortunately, the desired outcome was not achieved.

The process of achieving democratic civilian control over the Armed Forces and holding them accountable for their actions was viewed by members of this institution as a threat to their identity. Whenever the issue of separating the civilian and military spheres was raised to strengthen the new civilian regimes, the military often responded with annoyance or arrogance. Although we have always endeavored to adhere to a scientific methodology and rigor, we must acknowledge that both authors have openly expressed their opinions regarding the role of the military in Latin America and Spain. While some may perceive this as a bias that undermines the objectivity of our research findings, we maintain a different standpoint. We recognize the presence of underlying assessments, as identified by Murillo Ferrol (1963). It is crucial to acknowledge their existence, as overlooking them can potentially influence the outcome of an investigation.

Social scientists study a world inherently shaped by their own perspectives and viewpoints, making it challenging to approach their research object with a completely neutral perspective. However, if we proactively acknowledge this reality and conduct our work in a manner that upholds scientific rigor without compromising it, we can still achieve successful outcomes. Both authors are unequivocally committed to democratic values and we have always sought to ensure that our research can inform public policies and political decisions that can initiate or consolidate transitions to democracy, or facilitate a better understanding of the role of the Armed Forces in a democratic state. We clearly approached the military from the post positivism. Although we clearly pursue objectivity, we recognize the possible effects of biases, as many times we have approached individuals and an organization that—generally speaking—has committed crimes against humankind and supported for

decades regimes where civil liberties were not respected. Perhaps, Rut's publications (Diamint, 2003, 2006, 2018) can serve as a recount of some of the unpleasant or complicated experiences encountered during our commitment to the democratization of the Armed Forces.

2 Access to the Field

Unlike other public institutions, the Armed Forces hold a unique position as the primary tool for the state to exert its monopoly on violence and societal control (Bruneau & Matei, 2012; Pion-Berlin & Martínez, 2017). The military possesses the authority to classify certain matters as secret in the interest of national security, and here lies the temptation for the Armed Forces to utilize this classification privilege as a means of protecting themselves against intrusive scrutiny by academics. Moreover, possible career jeopardy, fear of exposing repression, or simply the lack of a democratic culture of accountability also contribute to the military authorities' profound suspicion of individuals outside the Armed Forces. In addition to these challenges, researchers exploring non-mainstream areas often encounter inherent skepticism and mistrust from those in uniform, further adding to the obstacles that need to be overcome. In addition to this, those researchers who study the military field can also be labeled as "friendly academics" serving the interests of whoever funds their research. Alternatively, our investigations are sometimes considered unnecessary by the Armed Forces, as well as by many of our peers and society. At best, they fail to comprehend why we invest our time in this demanding, unproductive, and seemingly irrelevant subject matter. If there are no longer any coups d'état, they question the need for such concern and effort.

Both researchers have gained access to the field, formal and informal alike, in various research projects. The work conducted over the last 30 years has established a sense of trust and reliability with the military, which has facilitated the process of obtaining authorizations and granted us access to a broader spectrum of military and political organizations. This access was not an easy or fast process, which may be a major drawback for young researchers who do not have enough time to develop these links. Despite our experience in social research practice, gaining access to such an apprehensive and closed universe demanded the development of different strategies. We discovered them either intuitively through trial and error or by following the advice of other researchers from the Armed Forces or related agencies such as the police or intelligence services (Soeters et al., 2014; Carreiras et al., 2016; Díaz-Fernández, 2005). It is worth noting that valuable precedents existed among Spanish and Latin American pieces (Agüero, 1995; Benítez Manaut, 2014; Busquets Bragulat, 1984; Diamint, 2003; Fuentes, 2009; Rial, 1990); however, in comparison, the existing literature on the US military, for instance, was much more extensive and often of higher quality (Feaver & Kohn, 2001; Kohn, 1997).

Undertaking rigorous, scientific, and systematic research on military affairs in our regions has often been hindered by numerous obstacles. These challenges were

even greater considering that Rut is a woman whose work has a social, critical, and social science focus, and Rafa is an academic from a university in Catalonia, Spain, a region where, due to tensions related to independence, researchers studying Spanish federal administration receive significant criticism. Rut's initial research study (Diamint, 1999) on the Armed Forces focused on the transition to democracy in Argentina and aimed to examine the persistent authoritarian legacies within the newly established democratic system. However, conducting interviews with military personnel proved to be extremely challenging. She faced resistance and was not welcomed by many. Even when some individuals agreed to participate, the hierarchical structure of the Armed Forces hindered the provision of truthful responses, particularly from lower-ranking officers. Over time, she managed to establish connections with a few young officers who were willing to engage in discussions. Nevertheless, she was unable to conduct a comprehensive statistical study of the military population.

2.1 The Gatekeepers

The military is intimately familiar with the institution on a daily basis and possesses deep knowledge from within. In contrast, academics often appear as outsiders with a limited understanding of military affairs, attempting to impose oversimplified notions or even biases and unattainable perceived standards. Rafa has always made efforts to initiate his projects through official channels and clearly communicate the research objectives to the organization. Without prior authorization, the studies would face potential roadblocks and likely be vetoed. That is the reason why, whenever possible, he enlisted the help of gatekeepers who could facilitate access and remove barriers. For instance, in the 1998 study, the recently established "Gutiérrez Mellado" University Institute played a crucial role in providing direct access to the Directorate General for Defense Policy of the Spanish Ministry of Defense.

In the REPENFAS21 project, initiated in 2019, having direct access to the civilian chief of staff of the Minister of Defense proved as well to be instrumental in gaining support and cooperation. Through a mutual friend, Rafa obtained the chief of staff's email address and reached out to introduce himself, explain his previous research, and request a meeting to discuss the project's requirements. After a month, Rafa had the opportunity to meet him in Madrid, although the meeting was frequently interrupted by telephone calls. This experience highlighted the challenges faced by the chief of staff in managing the ministry's agenda and emphasized the importance of being clear, concise, and direct when presenting research proposals and communicating needs to the gatekeeper. Despite the interruptions, Rafa managed to effectively convey the progress of the study conducted so far, articulate what he could offer, and outline his objectives. Within a short time, all the necessary authorizations, interview arrangements, and even a portion of the requested funding were obtained. An essential factor contributing to this swift resolution was the

positive references that Rafa's projects had received from the "Gutiérrez Mellado" Institute, with which a strong and fruitful relationship had been cultivated since 1998.

It is worth noting that these alliances and connections are built over decades and require continuous nurturing and reinforcement. However, connections with gatekeepers must be continuously updated. When senior civilian officials acquire a sufficient level of knowledge and expertise in defense matters, they are often reassigned to other areas of responsibility. Additionally, a change in the governing party can trigger their replacement. This is why it is essential to build trust not only with political officials but also with military officials within the Defense structures, as the latter tend to remain in the organization for longer periods of time.

Negotiating access is also a process of identifying what can be of interest to the participants and facilitating their willingness to take part in our study. In the 1998 project, questions made in our questionnaires on the role of women in the Armed Forces and on the recruitment of foreigners into the military, known to have been answered favorably, facilitated the adoption of policies in this regard. As an example, women had just been integrated into the Armed Forces in 1998, and the study demonstrated that there was good acceptance by the cadets of their integration into combat missions. Moreover, the study revealed that there were some recruitment difficulties, and citizens from Latin-American countries were seen as a potential source of personnel. The study also showed that the cadets' main concern was the quality of working conditions of the military personnel. Therefore, it is crucial to provide relevant and valuable feedback to our gatekeepers and the responsible individuals within military and political organizations. However, if the researcher is perceived as an uncomfortable parasite solely interested in extracting information from them, and in the worst-case scenario, interfering with their analysis, they will be unwilling to provide any data or grant access. However, sometimes what was initially considered a mutually beneficial arrangement abruptly changes. Rafa still remembers the request made by a senior commander who was unexpectedly promoted. He asked for the investigation, which was ready for publication, to be aborted. When he granted us permission to conduct interviews, he did not expect to be promoted. What initially appeared as a simple act of rebellion unexpectedly became a potential risk for him due to his unforeseen promotion.

Nonetheless, fieldwork has taught us a valuable lesson when it comes to providing interim analysis, such as an intermediary report, during the research process. While it may seem promising to offer glimpses of progress before the completion of the study, it can sometimes have unintended consequences. People can become impatient and unwilling to wait for the nuanced details that will later refine initial strong claims. Moreover, those who fear that the results may reflect poorly on them may start to take defensive actions, undermining the validity of the research process. Presenting a premature interim report can result in spending more time explaining and clarifying the interim findings rather than focusing on the final report. Therefore, our advice is clear: if possible, avoid submitting a mid-term report of the research. However, if an interim report must be delivered, it is crucial to concentrate on formal aspects such as the number of hearings or interviews conducted, challenges faced and overcome, and logistical problems resolved.

As part of the bargaining process that sometimes involves negotiating access to the field, it is possible that the principal investigator may be asked by the host institution or by the funder, such as the Armed Forces or Ministry of Defense, to include military personnel in the research team. This occurred to Rafa during the 1998 project conducted in military training centers in Spain. This petition is a double-edged sword: while their knowledge of the institution can undoubtedly be very relevant, those who suggest it typically have ulterior motives. Their intention is often not to enhance the research, but rather to have an inside source. This source can keep them perpetually informed and enable them to react swiftly to anything that, from their perspective, could jeopardize the institution, their career, or to potentially skew the analysis.

Another similar experience was when Rafa's team was told that the Armed Forces would help them by providing an interviewer, thus saving the team the trips that they would otherwise have had to do. The result was a disaster. Rafa would like to believe that it was not out of malice, but rather due to a lack of skill. However, the interviewer contaminated many of the responses with negative comments about the questions that were formulated, allowed superiors to be present in the room while interviewing soldiers, and edited answers. As a consequence, the results were published with a warning that cautioned readers of severe validity problems regarding the interviews (Martínez et al., 2012). To avoid such situations, it is crucial to maintain control over the various processes involved. The particular lesson learned is that in order to instil confidence in the interviewees and ensure confidentiality, especially when dealing with commanders, it is advisable to send an experienced researcher to conduct the interviews. In some projects, it is not uncommon for junior researchers to be assigned the task of conducting interviews in order to gain valuable experience. However, when it comes to the military, our experience suggests that this approach is not advisable at all.

Rut faced significant distrust from most Latin American military organizations. There was nothing similar to Rafa's experience, as the Ministries of Defense in Latin America were and are still undesirably connected to the military and do not have the power to demand a comprehensive study of the Armed Forces. However, through her professional career, she earned respect from military personnel in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, and Guatemala. Despite their initial resistance, the military eventually agreed to engage in discussions, even more extensively than anticipated. They wanted to be heard and express their perspectives, which they believed Rut had overlooked. Their hesitation was not rooted in a lack of trust in the researchers' analytical abilities, but rather a fear of the changes that could potentially disrupt their long-established status quo. The military perceived the process of democratization as a diminishing of their professional status. However, Rut's perseverance played a crucial role. She continued her work on the subject, and over time, whether willingly or reluctantly, the military began to recognize her as an expert in the field, for example, inviting her to be a speaker in the celebration of the 50 anniversaries of the Inter American Defense School (CID in Spanish). Her dedication and commitment helped bridge the gap and fostered a growing acceptance and acknowledgement of her expertise among military personnel.

Even with formal clearance granted, our experience has shown that formal access to an organization does not automatically translate into the willingness of individuals to collaborate, especially when dealing with sensitive topics. During our project with all military students in Spain back in 1998, Rafa's team had concerns that the project could be abruptly canceled at any point. Furthermore, there was a genuine concern that due to the historical lack of transparency, if the questionnaire were to fall into the hands of less open-minded members of the Armed Forces or the Ministry of Defense, the respondents, particularly the students, might already be influenced or indoctrinated to provide predetermined answers. And it is not only distrustful. In one particular military school, we could clearly hear the director instructing his deputy to distract us by giving us a tour of the facilities, while someone hurriedly obtained a questionnaire for him to review. He even mentioned the possibility of canceling the project depending on the nature of the questions. These instances highlight the need for careful navigation, constant vigilance, and adaptability to overcome potential obstacles and maintain the integrity of the research process.

2.2 Generating Rapport

In the initial stages of a project, it becomes imperative to provide as much certainty as possible regarding researchers' identity, purpose of the research, data processing procedures, and the intended use of the collected information. Beyond this transparency the researcher might show sufficient knowledge of the military world—what includes a precise use of the vocabulary and military terms—as there is a significant cultural gap due to most academics are not familiar with the military ethos. We must try to create a comfortable environment for participants and help them understand that the researcher is genuinely interested in their perspectives and eager to learn from them. Reinforcing this rapport by actively listening, nodding, and maintaining a respectful presence rather than a submissive one, has been a good option for us.

However, although trust must be generated and pursued, we must also be cautious and take preventive actions. During the 1998 project, and in anticipation that a coordinated response could be mounted in all the military training academies, Rafa's team arranged the logistics to ensure that the research team would be divided into groups of two or three members, and in ten hectic days the questionnaire was administered in all 32 military academies. There were days when we woke up in one city, had lunch in another, and slept in a different one. When we departed from the first academy, our perspective was quite pessimistic, and we even remarked: -Well, at least no one will be able to prevent us from studying this academy. On the ninth day of fieldwork, with three centers still to be surveyed, a member of the Army General Staff gave the order to halt the study and sequester the answer sheets from the previous 29 military schools. Rafa spoke with a highly respected Spanish personality to explain the situation to him. Following that, calls were made within the Ministry of Defense, and the Director General of Defense Policy had to intervene and lift the veto. He warned the different directors of academies involved that it was

a university research project and that the Armed Forces were only the object of study, they were the hosts, and they had no right to interfere with the research. The decision to whether to agree to host it had already been taken by the appropriate authority.

In the context of interviews, we acknowledge the significance of the interviewer's profile in the silent power dynamic that unfolds. This power dynamic can even come into play before the actual interview occurs. It is not uncommon for participants, including politicians we have worked with, to request a preview of the questionnaire. Our recommendation is to decline such requests. Instead, it is advisable to inform them about the topics that will be covered without providing specific questions in advance. Sharing the questions beforehand would compromise the spontaneity of the interview.

It is important for the interviewees to feel at ease, as perceiving a lack of control in the situation might cause them to become closed off and distrustful, which can hinder the gathering of necessary information. Therefore, we recommend allowing the participants to have some autonomy in selecting the date, location, and time of the interview. This approach would help establish rapport with the participant. However, it should be borne in mind that in a considerable number of times, interviewees are often in the room because a superior (military or civilian) has required them to do so, so they will be likely to finish the interview as quickly as possible. If after enduring two or three defensive answers, full of platitudes and vagueness, the researcher is able to draw the participant out and lead them to provide more elaborate answers, then the interview will properly begin. If the researcher fail to cross the Rubicon, it will be a waste of time for them both.

REPENFAS21 project, in which we interviewed members of Spain's political, military and defense industry elites, has confirmed this strategy. Nineteen of the 20 generals and admirals were interviewed for about an hour. However, there was one who dispatched us in 32 min after making the researchers wait longer than the interview lasted. He certainly carried out the order he had received from the Ministry of Defence to collaborate in the study, met us, and answered our questions, but he was deliberately unhelpful. The experience with the rest of the interviewees was successful and productive, and that is the bottom line. To see it otherwise would be to remain anecdotal.

After years of researching the military, two other formal issues have proven to be crucial for a smooth interaction with participants: punctuality and dress code. Military personnel highly value punctuality and hold a negative view of those who are unpunctual. Furthermore, the locations where researchers are summoned are often large facilities such as ministries or military installations, and there is typically a considerable distance to walk from the entrance to the participant's office. It is also common to undergo a security check beforehand. All of these factors can easily consume approximately 15 min. Arriving with plenty of time to spare, will allow the researcher to do so calmly, and if you are 5 or 10 min early, you can apologize and be led into a waiting room. If we fail to factor in this additional time, you will run the risk of being late and being nervous and flustered by the rush.

Being punctual is just as crucial as dressing respectfully, as military officers expect both from individuals. Male researchers are advised to wear a suit, including a tie-in winter and no tie-in summer. Female researchers should dress appropriately based on the interviewee's rank and adhere to the customary social norms of the country. Soldiers, and particularly officers, expect the researcher's attire to be in line with their own uniform. It is important that your clothing does not draw more attention, either through excess or deficiency, than your interview questions. While adhering to these formalities does not guarantee a successful interview, failing to meet either requirement would almost certainly have the opposite effect.

3 Techniques

Our research had employed three primary techniques: survey questionnaires, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and the Delphi method with experts. The use of interviews has consistently proven to be a valuable qualitative method. While the typical duration of interviews was around 60–70 min, we encountered a wide range of interview lengths. Some interviews lasted as short as 12 min, with a soldier who provided only brief, monosyllabic responses, while others extended beyond two and a half hours, involving senior commanders who shared insightful examples from their field experiences. During the interviews, we observed variations in the communication style of the participants. Some interviewees provide concise and knowledgeable responses, offering valuable insights into the subject matter. However, others tend to be slower in their responses. We have also noted that politicians often possess a lower level of technical knowledge on defense issues and tend to rely on repetitive slogans.

In certain cases, military personnel exhibit a sense of secrecy, which can stem from suspicion, orders from superiors, or a lack of understanding regarding the purpose and significance of being interviewed for that specific project. When faced with such situations, interviews become more challenging, requiring efforts to alleviate suspicion and establish rapport. Most of the time, we have been successful in interviewing the participants. However, in some cases, both the participant and the researcher were eager to bring the interview to an end. One common initial concern relates to recording. Although we have not encountered any major issues in this regard, on several occasions, despite agreeing to be recorded, interviewees have made half-serious, half-joking remarks such as: "I should be careful with what I say." To minimize distractions, it is advisable to use a discreet recording device (preferably flat in shape) and avoid drawing attention to it until the interview has been completed.

With surveys, particularly more than with interviews, the questionnaire plays a crucial role. Once it has been designed and given to the respondent, there is no possibility to clarify or modify a question if we find that it has not been properly understood. We have never opted for the questionnaire implemented by an interviewer (by telephone or in person); we have always used self-administered questionnaires with

answers on an Optical Mark Reader (OMR) sheet, or online implementation, through the Qualtrics software. In 1998, we conducted initial briefings without the presence of commanding officers in the room, explaining to the participants who the research team was, the aim of the study, and the research objectives. We emphasized that our focus was solely on processing aggregated data to potentially improve the institution's knowledge about its human resources. We assured them of their anonymity and made it clear that no personal examinations would be conducted. This setup also provided an opportunity to address any immediate questions or concerns.

The utilization of OMR serves to minimize potential errors that may arise during manual data transfer. Nonetheless, this approach does present logistical hurdles, including the provision of pencils, erasers, and pencil sharpeners for each participant, ensuring an adequate supply of sharpened pencils, and effectively managing the distribution and collection of materials. These logistical considerations introduce complexities and additional costs to the survey implementation process. However, OMR sheets enabled us to efficiently survey a large number of individuals (up to 400) simultaneously. This approach proved particularly effective during our visits to the 32 military academies where we were able to gather all the students in a single room, or split them into one or two shifts.

On the other hand, the online survey method offers logistical advantages and is generally considered more cost-effective. However, it does come with its own challenges. Apart from the expense of acquiring licenses for reliable software, another obstacle arises in the form of sending reminders to participants. In our study, we discovered that sending personalized invitations and reminders at two- and three-week intervals resulted in a higher response rate, enabling us to achieve our desired level of participation. However, we were mindful of maintaining a delicate balance between persistence and avoiding any sense of impertinence when sending reminders.

The latest technique we have used is the Delphi method which facilitated structured discussions among experts to gather insights on topics with limited available information (Beiderbeck et al., 2021). However, due to the logistical challenges of assembling in-person experts for multiple rounds of discussions, in REPENFAS21, we opted for an online implementation, that allowed us to access a diverse group of experts with highly specialized professional backgrounds and hectic agendas, who would have been otherwise difficult to bring together in a physical setting. For the purposes of this chapter, it is crucial to highlight that utilizing a self-administered online questionnaire facilitated our engagement with a group of experts possessing extensive knowledge and expertise, creating opportunities for valuable insights that would have been otherwise inaccessible due to spatial and temporal limitations (Vicente Oliva et al., 2023).

The size of the sample is something very relevant. Most of the time it is provided by the institution and we can't control the quantity or the individuals who participate. However, most of the time we have asked to access the whole universe (i.e., every student in the military school, or those senior commanders attending a specific course). In the overall ERGOMAS research initiative (3000 questionnaires, plus 550, and 250 interviews), which aimed to explore the cultural gap between the

military and the rest of the society, a specific decision was made to distribute the questionnaire in the officers' academies of the three-armed forces (Army, Navy, and Air Force), and in one Spanish university. However, without thorough consideration and for the sake of convenience, the University of Barcelona was selected, inadvertently overlooking the center-periphery cleavage. This oversight resulted in a significant discrepancy that did not accurately reflect the socio-political situation in Spain. Recognizing this limitation, we subsequently included the University of Burgos, located in the center of Spain where individuals tended to identify more strongly with a Spanish identity and held somewhat more conservative social views. Interestingly, the results from these two universities were contrasting. Consequently, to address the shortcomings of the sample and mitigate potential biases, we expanded our questionnaire distribution to four Spanish universities and utilized the average results obtained from all four institutions. This adjustment required considerable extra effort, labor, and resources.

When employing the Delphi method, the selection process for experts was more transparent. We established a set of criteria to guide our selection and actively sought out experts who met those criteria. Identifying highly prestigious experts was made possible through the networks we had developed over the years, as well as the reputation for rigor and reliability that our research and publications had cultivated among other experts. A similar observation can be made regarding the interviews we have conducted throughout the years. It has been through our network of contacts and the meticulousness of our work that doors have been opened and access granted. For early career researchers, beginnings can often be challenging, with many doors initially closed. Perseverance and transparency, along with active participation in congresses, conferences, and the dissemination of their research through publications, can gradually earn them a favorable reputation and expand their opportunities over time.

4 Ethical Considerations

None of our studies has been submitted to the ethics committees of our universities or research centers. The reason is that when we began our work three decades ago, these committees did not exist in our institutions. Moreover, it was our understanding that our studies were not particularly sensitive. In the case of the elites, we exclusively inquired about aspects of their work, while for the soldiers and sailors surveyed, the questions regarding socio-political topics were not different from those asked of the general public. It is true that perhaps we should have made greater efforts to allow those uninterested in responding to opt out. Due to the formal nature of the military environment, it is possible that the initial instructions provided in the questionnaires indicating the total voluntary character of their participation may have been insufficient. In retrospect, it may have been better to explore alternative methods that would have respected individuals' wishes to abstain from participating if they so desired.

Starting from the REPENFAS21 project (2019–2024), we have ensured that all participants are adequately informed about the research objectives and the level of collaboration expected from them. Prior to commencing the interview, participants are required to provide their informed consent by signing a form. This form includes various aspects, one of which is indicating their acceptance of the interviews being recorded. REPENFAS21 was the first study in which we used informed consent and the information sheet. Nevertheless, what our research team perceived as a breakthrough in conducting research according to higher ethical standards was not resonate the same way with the participants. The formality of the information sheet and the wording of the consent form, rather than reassuring them of the voluntariness and the commitment to privacy and confidentiality, alerted them as to the potentially serious outcomes that might result from the interviews.

One of the key risks inherent in conducting research of this nature is the potential for data leakage, which can compromise the anonymity and confidentiality necessary for such studies. Any unauthorized release of interview content, particularly when taken out of context or used for non-research purposes, can cause irreparable harm to the participants and have detrimental effects on the researcher's career. Moreover, interviewees may be tempted to deny statements they made or the permission they granted for their use. Additionally, it can result in intricate and expensive legal consequences.

Due to the absence of guidance from ethics committees, we took it upon ourselves to establish stringent protective measures from the beginning. In the interviews, to ensure participant anonymity, we adopted a common practice of using codes to identify participants, thereby eliminating any potential identification of them. When transcription of the interviews was necessary, we entrusted this task to companies holding European data protection certification. Those certified companies adhere to strict confidentiality requirements and implement robust security measures to safeguard the information. In the past, access to data was limited to a restricted group of researchers. However, in the present day, the entire research team has registered access to a securely encrypted hard disk contracted in a cloud environment. This approach was not driven by distrust but rather to mitigate the risk of unauthorized disclosure.

Since we did not have the opportunity to submit our research proposals to these committees, we were particularly attentive to the importance of protecting the participants and ensuring their anonymity. It was crucial that none of the participant's identities were revealed, avoiding stigmatizing specific military units or ranks, and preventing any negative impact on public opinion. After years of military opacity, we were determined not to convey misleading images or simplistic interpretations through our investigations, as such representations could reinforce the military institution's resistance to accepting researchers. Our goal was to conduct our research with integrity, respect for confidentiality, and a commitment to presenting a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the subject matter.

In the 1998 study, we recognized the clear risk of deductive disclosure, especially considering the small size of certain military training centers. With just two socio-demographic data, such as province of birth and father's occupation, it was

highly likely that the cadets could be easily identified. Additionally, some training centers had a minimal representation of women, further increasing the potential for deductive disclosure. During the implementation of the questionnaire at the first center, a coincidental observation occurred when the first woman placed her finished questionnaire on the desk occupied by the researchers. We noticed that she had not marked the “sex” box on the answer sheet. This made us aware of the potential risks, and each time we conducted a survey at a center, we remained vigilant about this possibility. We noticed that a majority of women did not complete the “sex” field, something that we did once the students left the room. Perhaps we should have engaged in further discussions regarding the ethics surrounding this decision. However, back in 1998, as the first study conducted on the Armed Forces in Spain, the prospect of surveying all students of military schools missing data on women population seemed to be an even less favorable option.

Regarding the physical protection of documentation, we took extensive measures to ensure its security. For instance, we opted for a researcher from the project to fly from Madrid to Barcelona to transport the answer sheets, instead of relying on a courier company. Although the risk of loss or information leakage was minimal, we chose this approach to mitigate any potential risks. Within this strategy of protecting participants, for example, the study on military academies in Spain (Martínez, 2007) was published seven years after its completion to ensure that the students surveyed had already left the academies and dispersed throughout dozens of military units across the country.

Reflecting on our early days of research, Rafa’s team was surprised that they did not encounter more difficulties considering their initial naivety and trust in the inherent protection offered by our good intentions and honesty. However, the team is grateful that they have not experienced any unfortunate incidents or malicious intent thus far. Nevertheless, Rafa had learned valuable lessons from this experience. First, never again conduct a sensitive interview without obtaining informed consent, and ensure that recordings are securely stored and encrypted to protect the confidentiality of the data.

5 Emotions: There Are Always some Bad Times

Throughout the thirty years of our research on military personnel in non-democratic contexts, as well as in democratic ones, we have encountered numerous situations that, in retrospect, may seem somewhat amusing. However, at the time, they instilled fear, unease, and raised concerns about the continuation of our work. Some of these situations were particularly uncomfortable. For example, there was an incident during which Rut was delivering a lecture on potential confidence-building measures to a high-level course at the Argentinean Navy. In a rather unpleasant manner, the sailors interrupted her lecture and displayed aggressive gestures, essentially preventing her from continuing with her presentation. The director of the Naval Academy intervened by interrupting the class and offering Rut a cup of coffee.

Subsequently, when the class resumed, a naval captain spoke on behalf of his classmates, apologizing for their inappropriate behavior.

On another occasion, during a lecture on the prosecution of human rights' offenders delivered to officers of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Argentina, the attendees began to shout and even insult the Argentinean president. Leveraging her prior experience, Rut managed to calm the situation, requesting that each person speak individually and justify their position. As they were compelled to articulate their views individually, the aggression dissipated, and they struggled to substantiate their stance. Both incidents serve as examples of the challenges encountered during our research. They underscore the importance of maintaining composure, engaging in respectful dialogue, and fostering an environment conducive to understanding differing perspectives.

The first time an army corps declared Rafael *nongrata* was in 1998. The fax machine in his office at the University received the document from three different numbers, seemingly with the intention to warn him before he was formally cautioned. In other words, even in the most challenging situations, there are always allies within the institution. That was undoubtedly the most critical moment during the project. The project was blocked, and the feeling of anguish and loneliness was immense. Part of the research team decided to leave the project or reduce their participation, fearing an abrupt end and the impossibility of publishing any results. This is when Professor Juan Linz enters the scene. With his prestige and reputation in studying democratic transitions, he was able to explain the relevance of our study to a part of the governmental elite. We included him as part of the research team, and with his protection and the better-informed elites, we were able to continue, albeit with some scars.

Cuba is undoubtedly the most challenging fieldwork setting that we have encountered. The military's prohibition against communicating with foreigners makes research extremely difficult (López Estrada & Deslauriers, 2011). Despite this, we were able to contact several retired military personnel, but only two active military members were interviewed by Rut. It is worth noting that these two officers were fearful and scared during the conversation, as they could have been sanctioned for speaking out. It is not for nothing that Cuba's Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR) are a central institution of the governing regime and wield enormous political and economic power. They also have strong capabilities for surveillance and repression that not only frightens the population but also its own members. Nobody trusts anybody. Building trusting personal relationships that allow you to access such impenetrable organizations is decades to develop. There can be no rush in these kinds of cases.

In the case of Cuba one of these complications took on a tragicomic tone in 2021. In some workshops with young Cubans held in Madrid and organized by Rut, we explained to them what transitions to democracy had been like in countries with Armed Forces that had little or no democratic tradition. Months later this became

the subject of news reports in the daily newspaper *Granma*,¹ on Cuban television news programs, and on its official program “*Razones de Cuba*” (Reasons for Cuba).² During the TV program, one of the workshop participants named Dr. Carlos Leonardo Vázquez González, made a startling admission. He revealed that he had served as a Castro spy for over twenty years. Referred to as Agent “Fernando”, he publicly identified us as “Army generals” on both a television and radio program. He accused us of encouraging the Armed Forces to confront the people.³ One of the consequences was that Rut and other participating researchers were unable to return to Cuba. Frustration at not being able to complete such an interesting research project was our predominant emotion.

6 Lessons Learned and Methodological Perspectives

As noted in previous sections, military personnel have a dislike for uncertainty and are reluctant to answer questions that could potentially endanger their professional career, or allow their subordinates to exercise freedom of expression in such a way as to compromise their service record. Consequently, it is quite common to be requested to provide questionnaires in advance, allowing them to prepare noncommittal answers. Our advice is to never agree to do this. At most, you might wish to generally outline the items that will be addressed. If answers are prepared, naturalness is lost and, ultimately, all interviews run the risk of being identical, as participants can communicate with each other or receive guidelines from the higher levels of the organization.

Successfully overcoming these defense mechanisms and apprehensions requires significant time and experience. If these barriers are not effectively addressed, the resulting answers will hold little value for research purposes. In fact, several interviews proved to be inconsequential due to defensive, hesitant, unwilling, or vague responses from the interviewees. In circumstances where adverse conditions prevail, it is preferable to abstain from conducting an interview or survey. These processes demand substantial effort and resources. Therefore, prior to initiating fieldwork, it is crucial to carefully assess whether you have devised the most suitable approach strategy and obtained sufficient credentials to ensure access and conduct research effectively.

Another considerable risk, particularly prevalent in non-democratic environments, is the risk of co-optation. That risk is always present, and only the

¹ <https://www.granma.cu/pensar-en-qr/2021-11-01/las-acciones-de-yunior-no-son-genuinas-el-agente-fernando-lo-prueba-01-11-2021-22-11-43>

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qL2uO70bTxc&list=PLFHsQ4qYzNtF2zRgOLBAGXNF Iw7gkijZF&index=17>

³ (Radio Cubana, 11/11/2021, minute 11:40) <https://www.radiocubana.cu/articulos-especializados-sobre-la-radio/radio-cubana/el-agente-fernando-afirma-quieren-construir-agentes-de-cambio-en-cuba-audio/>

researcher's own integrity can protect him from it. The best and only strategy is to refuse any temptations to accept perks or benefits in exchange for altering or softening the conclusions of a study. When the researcher succumbs to their demands, they forfeit their freedom to thoroughly analyze and report on the issues identified within those organizations. Resisting certain pressures may indeed entail risks to the study, but it serves to uphold your scientific prestige and strengthen your research integrity. Engaging in confrontation serves no purpose.

One possible approach to enhance protection could have been a more active presence on social media or the Internet, where we could have shared our research findings instead of relying solely on Google's algorithms to determine our online visibility. By making our texts readily available for potential participants to read, showcasing the support and funding received from ministries and reputable organizations, and highlighting the discreet media coverage of our research, we might have been able to reduce any reluctance or skepticism about our intentions. This transparency could have facilitated a better understanding of our work and minimized reservations among potential participants.

For over thirty years, we have tirelessly cultivated what was once desolate land. Through persistent efforts of cleansing and nourishment, we have transformed it into fertile ground. Your steadfastness and integrity will serve as your greatest allies, just as they have been for us. However, it is crucial to prioritize your own protection to ensure that any stumbling blocks you encounter are not irreparable. Engaging in meaningful research on the military is an immensely fulfilling endeavor. Often, extensive efforts will be required to explore the theoretical dimensions since the existing literature may not be comprehensive. It will be necessary to conduct relevant measurements, analyze the data, and compare them against established theoretical principles to validate your hypotheses. This process can be lengthy and exhausting at times, but the satisfaction of contributing as a scientist will be unparalleled.

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