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From failure to emancipation: the case for a feminist research practice

Ottavia Cima (Luxembourg, LU).

Which researcher has never experienced a disruption of her empirical plans caused by unforeseen events or unexpected findings? Who has not perceived this disruption at least in part as a "failure" of her planning skills or, maybe at the same time, as the consequence of some "imperfections" of her research object? And who, as a consequence, has not felt frustrated and disappointed by herself and/or by her research object? At the same time, methodology courses and handbooks on qualitative empirical research often present the consecutive steps of linear and defined research designs (e.g. Flick 2004). The broadly accepted format of research outputs usually demands a standard structure that mirrors the linearity of the ideal research design. Reflections about the contingencies of empirical research and the positionality of the researcher, in the best cases, are relegated in a dedicated section in a methodological chapter.

In this contribution[34] I reflect on the consequences of the emphasis on the ideal of linear research designs. I argue that such emphasis can produce feelings of failure and disappointment in the researching subject, because it conceals the material and affective dimensions of the actual research process. I contrast this approach with a feminist epistemology and research practice that considers research a situated process (Rose 1997) and a relational practice (Gibson-Graham 2014) and that understands the affects, emotions and intimate perceptions of the researching subject not as biases that should be avoided or silenced but as an integral, and legitimate, part of research (Laliberté and Schurr 2016). Drawing on the experience of my doctoral research, I suggest that embracing a feminist performative ontology (Gibson-Graham 2014) does not only allow to understand the feelings of failure and disappointment that we might experience in relation to our research; it also opens space for destabilising and rethinking established categories that would otherwise remain unquestioned.

Failures

I set foot in Kyrgyzstan for the first time in 2014 for an exploratory visit for my doctoral dissertation. I was particularly affected by the encounter with a cooperative that, before Kyrgyzstan's independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, was a Soviet collective farm. The next year I went back to the same cooperative and proposed to its director to conduct my research with the cooperative. However, to my disappointment and despair, he categorically refused my proposition. After this first, painful, refusal, I visited other cooperatives of the same kind as well as other more recent cooperatives established in the 2000s by groups of farmers with the support of international development agencies. I collected further refusals but, also, it seemed that most cooperatives did not exist anymore, if not in some registers. When I finally found a cooperative that seemed to be still active and whose director was open and welcoming, it took me only a few additional days to understand that there were no concrete collective activities linked to the cooperative and that it was even unclear who were its members. Farmers, furthermore, seemed to ignore the basic principles of cooperatives (see ICA 2016).

Initially, I perceived the difficulties to find a cooperative suited to be a case study as a "failure" of my fieldwork plans and of my empirical research skills. While accumulating personal "failures", I started suspecting that, besides my own research skills, also cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan were a "failure". This observation resonated with the comments of development workers who explained to me that cooperatives had indeed "failed" in the country because farmers were too lazy to actively engage in cooperation. These explanations, in turn, resonated with some scholarly analyses that pointed to the difficulties in implementing community-based cooperation in Central Asia and, more generally, in ex-socialist contexts (e.g. Lerman 2013, Theesfeld 2019).

"Failure", together with feelings of disappointment and frustration, was thus a recurrent theme in the early years of my doctoral research. I was not only disappointed by my own incapacity to find a suited case study, to make sense of farmers' contradictory statements about cooperatives and to grasp an object – cooperatives – that seemed the more elusive the more I tried to define it. I was also disappointed by the "failure" of cooperatives themselves: I perceived this "failure" as villagers' incapacity to organise a form of resistance to the expansion of a market economy in an ex-socialist country. These feelings resonated with the feelings expressed by other actors. The writings of some scholars hinted implicitly to their own lack of hope for ex-socialist countries and their populations (e.g. Gardner and Lerman 2006). Development workers expressed their frustration for farmers' incapacity to understand the meaning of cooperatives and to engage in cooperation activities. Farmers expressed their hopelessness and disillusionment by suggesting that, indeed, they perceived themselves as too ignorant and too lazy to engage in cooperation initiatives.

Affects as an entry point to deconstruct "failure"

At this point, I could have concluded – like several scholars, analysts or development workers who are caught in short-term mandates and the imperative of quick results – that indeed cooperatives failed in Kyrgyzstan because of farmers' lack of understanding and lack of willingness to engage in collective activities. This reading, however, clashed with what I was experiencing while living in Kyrgyzstan: the generous hospitality of my interlocutors; the strong kinship ties regulating diverse forms of mutual support and reciprocal obligations; the frequent collaboration between relatives and friends for various activities, from agricultural fieldwork to the organisation of celebrations. In order to make sense of these contradictions, and instead of confirming what many already claimed to

[34] I am thankful to Sarah Klosterkamp and Alexander Vorbrugg for their feedback on earlier versions of the paper.

know, I pursued my engagement with the everyday reality of Kyrgyzstani villagers[35]. It is in particular by embracing a feminist epistemology that I was able to develop a different reading of this reality as well as to tackle the negative affects I was experiencing and observing[36].

Feminist epistemology understands the process of knowledge production as shaped by power relations; the researcher is not an external neutral observer but is deeply embedded in these power relations (Haraway 1988). Feminist scholars insist on the material and affective dimensions of knowledge production, intended as a process that is situated in a specific context, place and bodies (Gibson-Graham 2006: 1-22). The body is the site where social processes – including knowledge production – are enacted and experienced: it is "a social, political and economic location" and simultaneously a "sensory agent" (Noxolo 2009: 63). The process of knowledge production – or, better said, of learning – then consists first of all in the transformation of the researching subject through her sensory experiences and intimate connections (Gibson-Graham 2011). It is not about confirming what we already know and who we already are, but about "becoming other, creating connections and encountering possibilities" (Gibson-Graham and Roelvink 2010: 322).

Within this epistemology, the sensory and affective experience of the researcher – and its evolution in time – are integral, if not central, part of learning and can represent a privileged entry point for understanding broader social processes (Militz, Faria and Schurr 2019). I felt thus legitimate to explicitly tackle my affective experience instead of silencing it as something not worth of scientific thoughts and texts. The feelings of failure, frustration, disappointment, but also my deepening attachment to my Kyrgyzstani interlocutors, became the entry point for a new set of questions. Where did these feelings originate? How were they produced within specific power structures? Against what understanding of success did the sense of failure emerge? How to make sense of the contrast between the apparent "failure of cooperation" and the reciprocal bonds in which I was becoming embedded? The unpacking of my own affective experience allowed to ask new questions also about the other dimensions of failure reported in the former section, in particular about the affective experiences and discursive statements of the actors I encountered. How did the statements of actors – including myself – produce feelings of failure in themselves and others? What assumptions and categories underpinned these statements and feelings? With what consequences for the different actors?

Asking these questions revealed that the different perceptions and statements of failure originated from narrow and often biased understandings of its contrary – success (see also Cima *forthcoming*). I was frustrated because my actual empirical research was not following the research design models proposed in handbooks and implicit in the structure of academic writings. I was disappointed by cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan because I was looking for a very specific form of resistance to market domination that had emerged in a completely different historical and geographical context (see Fairbairn 1994). On the other hand, development workers, like the scholars mentioned above, considered to be "true" cooperatives only those cooperatives that correspond to the model – well-established in the Global North – of the service and marketing cooperative (in short: service cooperatives). In this model, empowered private farmers-entrepreneurs produce independently but join others for specific activities (see Lerman 2013); collective activities should be regulated by formal statutes and comply with universal cooperative principles, which are, however, the result of situated negotiations over several decades.

Once such blueprint models are applied in practice, actors necessarily reinterpret them according to the local specificities: power relations, existing practices, cultural habits, affective attachments (Mosse 2004). In Kyrgyzstan, development agencies promoted the model of service cooperatives. Farmers adapted this model to their previous agricultural practices: for instance, they used the framework of service cooperatives to support informal practices of collective production and to access much-needed agricultural inputs and information. Development workers too reinterpreted the terms of cooperative promotion: for instance, they often supported groups of farmers to register as formal cooperatives in order to access punctual credit schemes and not as a way to reconfigure their agricultural practices in line with the cooperative model. Cooperative promotion, in these regards, was not neces-

[35] This was possible, in the first place, because enough time and financial resources were available. My doctoral research was funded during 5 years through a position at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland. The *Fonds de recherche du Centenaire* and the Geography Unit of the same University covered fieldwork expenses: my acknowledgements go to both.

[36] Three workshops of the CUSO Doctoral School were particularly inspiring in this regard: (1) *Penser les ratés de terrains*, CUSO Sociology, 2015; (2) *Glissements de terrain: théorie et pratique des difficultés de terrain*, CUSO Geography, 2018; (3) *Méthodologies féministes, postcoloniales et critiques de la race en géographie*, CUSO Geography, 2019. I am grateful to their organisers, contributors and participants.

sarily a failure, since it provided farmers with an additional tool they could mobilise to support and expand their agricultural activities.

The statement of failure – with the related feelings of disappointment, frustration and hopelessness – originates from the comparison of the necessarily contingent and localised reality with idealised universal models: in this case the model of service cooperatives but also, for myself, the model of anti-capitalist cooperatives and of linear research designs. Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis (as interpreted in particular by Healy 2010), I conceptualise these ideals and their related affective mechanisms as *fantasies*: subjects strive for an object of desire that is intrinsically impossible to realise. Instead of recognising the impossibility of their desire, subjects who are trapped in fantasmatic mechanisms produce simultaneously the obstacle that prevents the realisation of their desire: a scapegoat or, in Lacanian vocabulary, a "symptom". The blame (and self-blame) on farmers for the "failure" of cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan can be seen thus as a scapegoat that justifies the impossibility to establish model cooperatives in the country. The non-realisation of the desire, on the one hand, produces frustration and disappointment; on the other, the blame on farmers often traps them in a disempowering hopelessness.

A performative ontology to foster other affects

How can we, then, attempt to transform these negative feelings into more positive ones? Gibson-Graham (2014: 149) insists on the need to understand knowledge as performative and, therefore, to accept that "how we represent the world contributes to enacting that world". This results in the "collapse [of] the distinction between epistemology and ontology" (*ibid.*) and thus in a *performative ontology* within which researchers bear a profound responsibility for how we choose to describe and make sense of the world. Indeed, the different layers of "failure" – including scholars' statements – discussed in the previous sections reinforce each other and produce a reality in which cooperatives cannot but "fail" in Kyrgyzstan. At the same time, however, a performative approach opens possibilities for fostering alternative, more positive, affects, by changing our representations of failure and success, or of cooperatives and development.

Indeed, the fantasy mechanisms about cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan emerge within a broader representation of "success" as the progress along a defined trajectory towards free market, economic development and private entrepreneurship. Development programmes often focus on the economic sphere, thereby ignoring other dimensions of social reality (Kim et al. 2018); moreover, the understanding of what is a legitimate part of "the economy" is often limited to formalised, monetised and market-based activities (Gibson-Graham 2006). Then, if Kyrgyzstani farmers gave me nebulous definitions of cooperatives and contradictory accounts on their statutes, members and activities, it does not mean that they do not understand cooperatives in general. It only means that they lack the *specific* knowledge about an ideal model of formal cooperative (for a similar argument on civil society promotion in Central Asia see Babajanian et al. 2005). At the same time, the fact that many actors confirmed the "failure" of a specific type of cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan does not exclude that other forms of cooperatives might be successful: these can be for instance of cooperatives with a stronger component of collective production (Agarwal 2010).

Furthermore, the fact that some scholars and development workers lament difficulties in the implementation of cooperation initiatives in ex-socialist countries does not exclude the existence of other forms of cooperation. On the contrary, the agricultural sector in Kyrgyzstan is largely based on cooperation within networks of relatives, friends and acquaintances that, although not formalised, are regulated by well-defined reciprocal obligations and informal institutions (Botoeva 2015). These cooperation practices remain often invisible to actors – including donors, scholars and farmers themselves – who assume the narrow categories discussed above. The consequences of this invisibilisation are threefold. First, an entire population is stigmatised as incapable of cooperation and, more in general, as inadequate for development. Second, cooperation initiatives, such as cooperative, cannot build on the potential of existing networks and practices. Third, for both villagers and external actors is difficult to identify – and thus tackle – the exclusions and inequalities that such practices produce.

As a way to counter this reading of cooperatives, I propose a more fluid and flexible understanding: cooperatives are not to intend as formal bounded objects but as the result of contingent practices and decisions that touch on multiple economic, social, cultural and affective dimensions (Gibson-Graham 2006: 101-26). Therefore, drawing on Emery et al. (2017), I suggest that, when analysing cooperative experiences, both researchers and development workers should refrain from comparing them with an idealised (and impossible) model but should instead approach them with a set of open questions. For in-

stance: what formalised or unformalised practices of cooperation are carried out in the specific local context? Who is included or excluded by these practices? What kind of inequalities do these practices produce? How do formal structures interact with unformalised practices? The open engagement with local practices beyond the fantasy of ideal models of cooperatives allowed me to provide some answers to these questions in my doctoral thesis (see Cima 2020).

Conclusion

In order to embrace such a fluid approach to cooperatives and cooperation, it is thus necessary first of all to "traverse the fantasy" (see Healy 2010) of idealised models of cooperatives – and of development or the economy. This means acknowledging and accepting that such models are impossible to realise in practice, because actors will always renegotiate and reinterpret them. It means, in other words, to accept that cooperatives, like all social processes, are always open-ended, never pre-determined processes; it means learning to "stay with the trouble" of an intrinsically fragmented, ambivalent and incomplete world (Nightingale 2019, drawing on Haraway 2016). Such an approach is hardly compatible with the idea that empirical research and knowledge production can and should correspond to linear designs and structures. Instead, it requires to simultaneously "traverse the fantasy" of ideal, linear, research models and to embrace a more fluid research practice that allows to remain open to the unexpected and the unknown (Healy 2010) – in particular a feminist research practice based on a performative ontology as I have outlined in this contribution.

A commitment to traverse fantasies and stay with the trouble, I argue, has positive effects on multiple levels. Concerning cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan, but also development programmes worldwide, such a commitment would mean to definitely abandon the assumption that development programmes can be applied in practice as blueprint models. Instead, researchers could focus on a re-reading of local experiences in their specificity without contrasting them with idealised models. Acknowledging this specificity – and its uniqueness – can be a way for researchers to avoid reinforcing generalised stigmatisations of particular social groups and thus to assume the responsibility for the representations we produce – for our ways of speaking about the world and enacting it thereby.

Finally, such a commitment would not only allow scholars a more nuanced and precise understanding of local processes of cooperation, as discussed above, but also a sort of emancipation. It would mean to abandon the ideal (or the fantasy) of linear research designs and fully predictable and manageable research practices. This, I argue, could help us tackling one of the multiple causes for increasing stress, frustration and mental health problems among scholars (see Peake et al. 2018). Acknowledging and accepting the "trouble" of empirical research – its contingency, incompleteness and unpredictability – at the individual as well as at the institutional level, can be one of the several steps needed towards a more convivial academia (see Corbera et al. 2020).

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