

Qualitative methods in tough spaces
Danilo Mandić

As much as researchers plan their work, improvisation is always necessary when conducting field research, particularly in “tough” spaces where unpredictability is a common feature.

Fortunately, the more one prepares, the better one is able to improvise. This session explored the differences between interviews, surveys and ethnographic observation in refugee sites, and how they fit together to support improvisation.

The session discussed the limitations and advantages of different ways of observing and talking to refugees, navigating refugee camps and other sites, recruiting informants, recognizing and reacting to trauma, building trust, sampling respondents and evaluating data quality.

Particular attention was given to high-turnaround camps on the Balkan Route during the recent migrant crisis.



“If anything is specific to tough spaces—tough camps, tough urban refugee neighborhoods—it’s the increased need to be pragmatic.”

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Key Challenges & Questions

Often, researchers make the mistake of seeing preparation and improvisation as polar extremes.

The more troubled a research site is the more risks, the less stability, and the less space for rigid research design execution.

Best Practices

In reality planning and improvisation strategies are complementary: the more one prepares, the better one is to adapt. In “tough spaces” there is an increased need to be pragmatic and to prepare to be pragmatic.

Once in the field, a researcher should have pragmatic alternatives laid out ahead of time, with a plan B, and a plan C, and a plan D.

Researchers should also allow themselves and their team to make mistakes and constantly learn in an iterative process.

Key Challenges & Questions

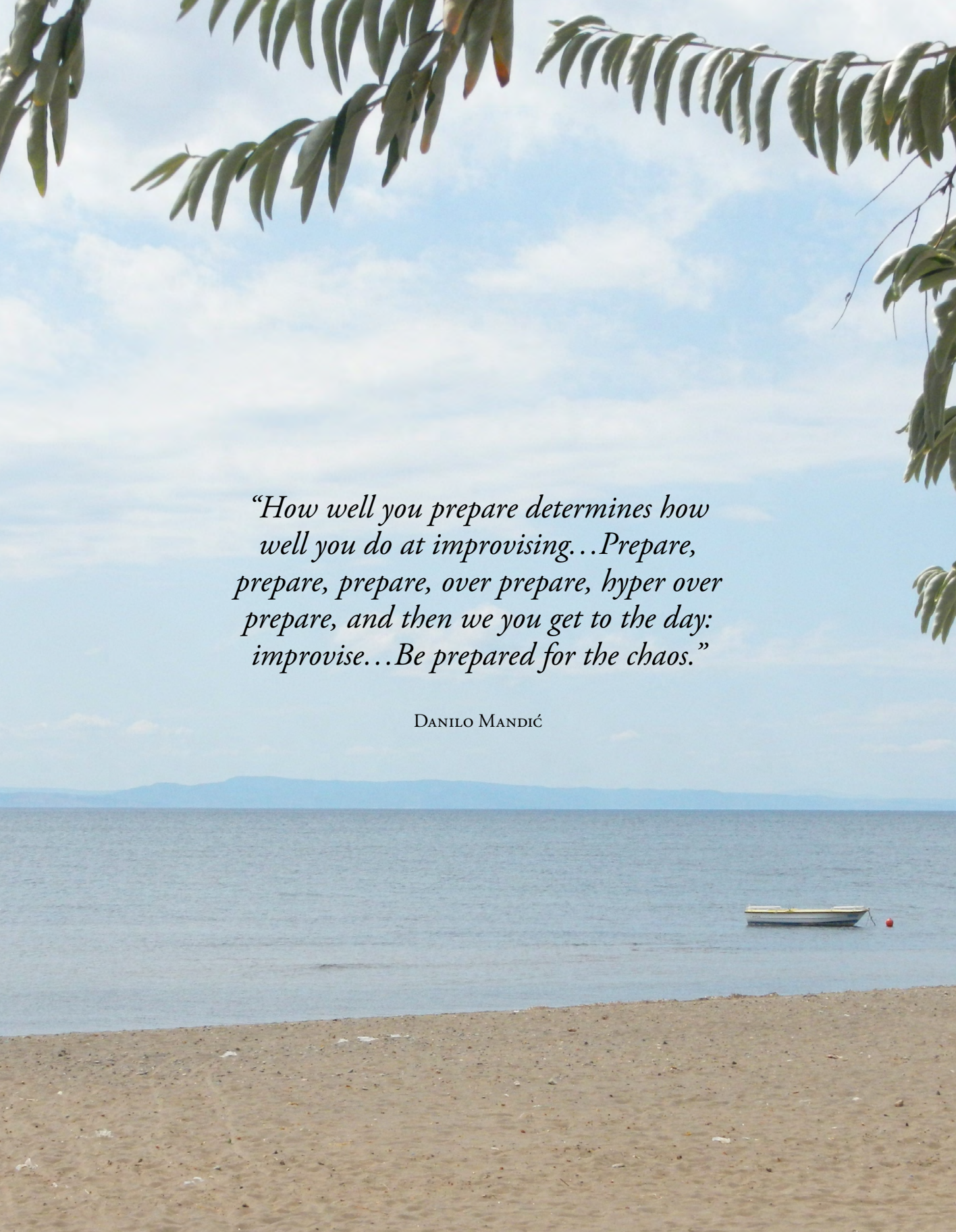
What happens when a research plan “falls in the water” as soon as the researcher enters the field and begins attempting to collect data?

Having a research design fall apart once reaching the field is a nearly ubiquitous experience for researchers of forced migration and other hidden, mobile, or vulnerable populations.

Best Practices

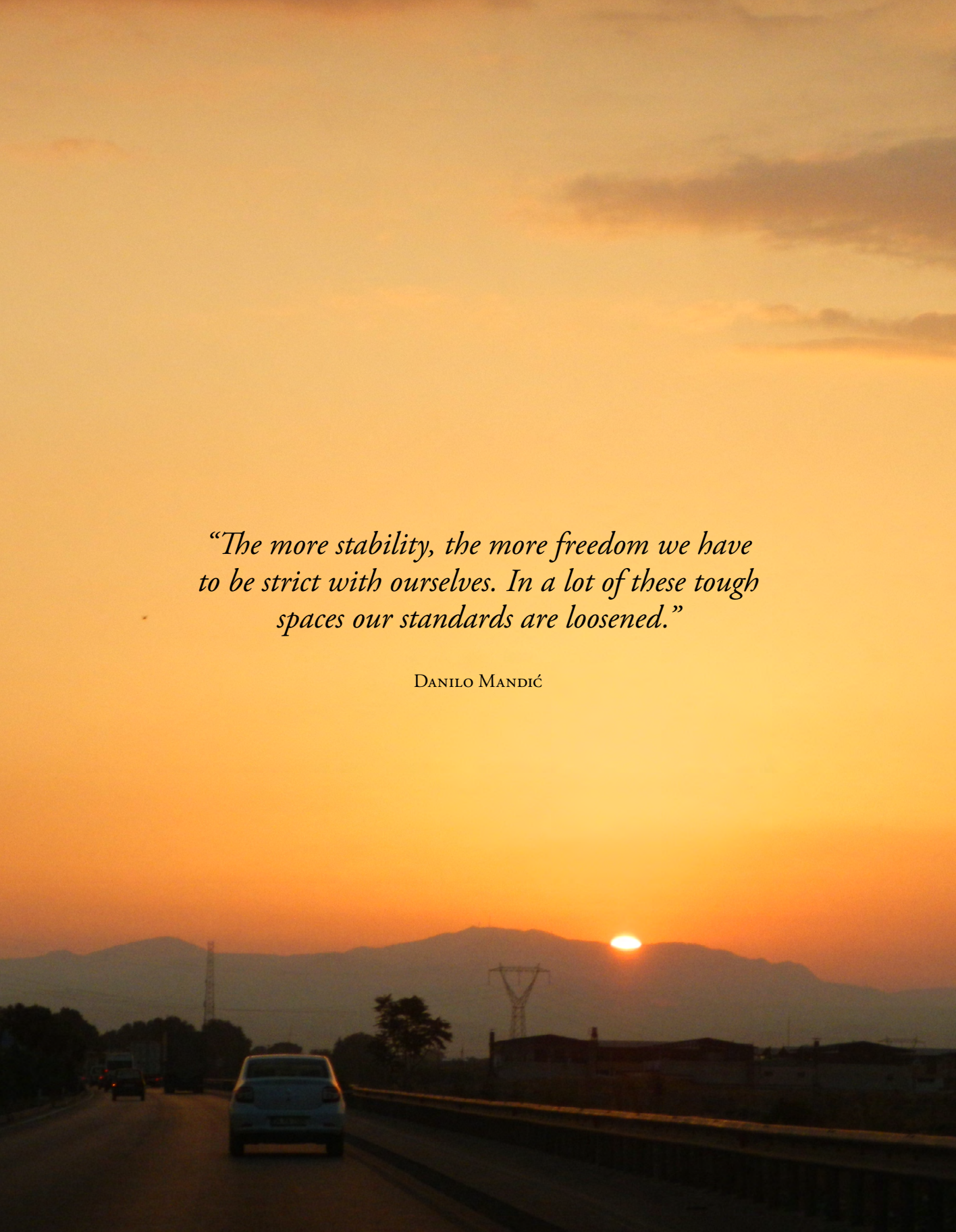
Triangulation of multiple research techniques allows a researcher to adapt to different conditions. A researcher should not go out and say, “I want to do ethnography,” but rather be able to do ethnography, surveys, and in depth interviews in different contexts when the situation is right.

For example, if a participant who the researcher wanted to conduct an in depth interview with is only available for ten minutes, if the researcher has a short survey prepared they can still collect valuable data: preparation and flexibility allow good data collection despite complications.

A scenic view of a beach with a small boat on the water and mountains in the distance. The foreground shows a sandy beach. The middle ground features a calm body of water with a small, light-colored boat floating on the right side. In the background, there are low, hazy mountains under a blue sky with scattered white clouds. Green leaves of a tree are visible in the top corners of the frame.

“How well you prepare determines how well you do at improvising...Prepare, prepare, prepare, over prepare, hyper over prepare, and then we you get to the day: improvise...Be prepared for the chaos.”

DANILO MANDIĆ

A photograph of a sunset over a highway. The sun is a bright orange circle on the horizon, partially obscured by a mountain range. The sky is a gradient of orange and yellow. In the foreground, a white car is driving away on a multi-lane highway. There are other vehicles further ahead. A power line tower is visible on the right side of the road. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

*“The more stability, the more freedom we have
to be strict with ourselves. In a lot of these tough
spaces our standards are loosened.”*

DANILO MANDIĆ

Key Challenges & Questions

How can researchers overcome the intense community politics and lack of trust of foreigners commonly experienced in “tough spaces”?

Best Practices

Get to know the space in advance, including who the informal street leaders are, the kinds of vulnerabilities like riots that are common, and the experiences of individuals who have spent time there in the past including journalists, aid workers, and migrants who passed through previously.

All researchers have multiple identities: you can use these multiple identities within the bounds of reason, ethics, and without lying to build rapport and trust with different communities. For example, a researcher may go by “Dan” among Kosovars, but as “Danilo” among Serbs. Careful consideration about situationally appropriate dress, tone, mannerisms, and other forms of presentation are all critical.

Take advantage of institutional memory: the cops refugee centers for example have the memory of being refugees during the Balkan Wars 20 years ago. Asking histories not only provides valuable data but builds trust with members of the community.

Key Challenges & Questions

How can a researcher deal with trauma of residents that may be more prevalent in “tough spaces”?

Best Practices

If a researcher is dealing with a population where trauma is anticipated, the researcher needs training both on identifying and dealing with the full spectrum of trauma symptoms.

This can be achieved through reading the numerous documents on the topic from Harvard, WHO, and HSRP. Simulating worst case scenarios like a respondent having an emotional breakdown during an interview help researchers from being caught off guard. Preparation and resources for dealing with secondary trauma is absolutely essential.

“Learn the space: just because it’s a tough space doesn’t give an excuse to not know it. Talk to people who have been there, look in the news, have their been riots? Who are the street leaders?”

DANILO MANDIĆ



Key Challenges & Questions

The difficulty of producing good data in tough spaces results in widespread misperceptions and prejudices about them.

Researchers often enter these spaces with false assumptions based on inaccurate conventional narratives and bad data.

Best Practices

When reading up on a “tough space” in advance, consider how surveys or other data may have been skewed. For example, UNHCR surveys rarely consider the “anchoring effect” in their design.

Generating good findings is in part about researchers’ willingness to overcome confirmation bias and being willing to question pre-existing assumptions.

Look at both the top down perspective and the bottom up perspective. The narrative presented by UNHCR of refugees in Thessaloniki from the top down may not represent the perspective of refugees or smugglers from the bottom up.