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THE FAMILIAR AND THE FOREIGN: LOCAL AND VISITING RESEARCHERS IN HIGHLY VIOLENT AREAS

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ABOUT THE PROGRAM

The Drugs, Security and Democracy (DSD) Program strives to create a stronger, more systematized knowledge base on drugs, security, and democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean; to build capacity—both institutional and individual—by supporting relevant research; and to encourage policy-relevant, evidence-based research that could lead to the development of alternatives to present-day drug policies. Support is provided for research across a variety of disciplines—anthropology, criminology, economics, history, international relations, journalism, legal studies, political science, public health, public policy, sociology, and other related fields—to create a network of scholars interested in developing alternative approaches to drug policy.

ABOUT THE SERIES

Over the last generation, activists, journalists, and researchers working in Latin America have increasingly faced the challenge of operating in areas affected by chronic police and non-state violence. Further, rising crime rates are leading a growing number of scholars to conduct research on high-risk topics, which involves gathering data on communities that experience conflict, writing and publishing on these difficult and sensitive issues, and developing and implementing programs to deal with the needs of communities affected by violence as well as the wider conflicts in which those communities are embedded. Despite these trends, the literature on safe practices for those working in high-risk environments remains thin. The DSD Working Papers on Research Security series seeks to address this deficit by examining a range of research security concerns, providing a framework to help those working in the region consider how they can enhance their own safety as well as the safety of their associates and research participants.

THE FAMILIAR AND THE FOREIGN: LOCAL AND VISITING RESEARCHERS IN HIGHLY VIOLENT AREAS

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As a discipline that seeks to highlight cultural diversity, anthropology requires the “defamiliarization” of the researcher from his or her own culture. The anthropologist’s subsequent surprise at aspects of the culture presumably leads to a desire to examine all that is different in it. In this order of ideas, defamiliarization is a precondition for conducting participant observation of one’s own culture to arrive at a complete understanding of it.

To facilitate defamiliarization, universities in the United States long required anthropologists to carry out their dissertation fieldwork in countries other than their own. By the time I was doing coursework for my doctorate from 1994 to 1996 and was ready to embark on predissertation research and propose a thesis project, however, this rule had been abolished, and I was permitted to propose fieldwork in my country, Colombia. This led me to some insights on what is involved in being a native researcher in a highly violent area, as well as, by extension, what is involved in being a researcher from another country.

PROPOSING RESEARCH TOPICS AND METHODS

As is the case with any proposal for research to be conducted in disputed areas, the evolution of my dissertation topic was, in large part, dictated by events. In graduate school I took a course called Violence in Modern Nations, which impressed on me the importance of the anthropological perspective in understanding daily violence. I asked myself why I had never questioned the violence in Putumayo, a region with a guerrilla presence in Colombia's western Amazon where, by that time, I had worked with indigenous groups for some fifteen years. With the promulgation of a new constitution in 1991 that recognized Colombia's multicultural society, I began to witness confrontations in the region in which indigenous people demanded that settlers return land to them, the region's ancestral inhabitants. In light of these events, and taking note of the fact that the new constitution granted special rights and political representation in the Senate to indigenous groups while the *campesinos* who had settled in the region were increasingly marginalized, I decided to use my doctoral research to examine the social and cultural identity of the *campesinos*, who had been arriving in Putumayo since the beginning of the twentieth century. Even the word "settler" (*colono* in Spanish) failed to describe adequately people whose families had lived in the region for three generations and had come to identify as Putumayans.

Although guerrilla groups were present in the area throughout the 1980s during my earlier work there, it was never considered a "red zone"—that is, in military terminology, a region or locality considered to be a war zone, where the state's monopoly on the use of force is challenged by irregular armed groups, be they guerrillas, paramilitaries, or criminal organizations. In the 1990s, though, it took on all the characteristics of a highly violent place. By the time I traveled to the region for my predissertation research in the summer of 1996, the social movement of *campesino* coca growers from settler families had burst into view in Putumayo, Caquetá, and Guaviare, the three departments (provinces) that make up Colombia's western Amazon. This uprising was a response to the intensification of aerial fumigation of coca plantations in this region due to the War on Drugs promoted by the United States. More than two hundred thousand *campesinos* marched from the rural areas to the nearest towns and departmental capitals to protest the heightened threat to their livelihood, illustrating the extent to which coca cultivation was a pillar of their economic well-being. Moreover, coca was being produced mainly for drug trafficking, intensifying violent confrontations

between guerrillas and paramilitaries, both of which sought to dominate the market for coca and impose taxes on its production.

By 1998 and 1999, when I returned to the region to do my dissertation research, paramilitary fighters had arrived to take their place alongside other non-state armed groups, such as guerrillas and organized drug traffickers. Paramilitaries carried out a series of notorious massacres intended to instill fear in the civilian population and establish themselves as an alternative to the guerrillas as a local ruling authority. By 2000, they were well established in the region, and each armed group had carved out a territory under its own control, subjugating inhabitants and limiting their movements. They operated in the zone as the Southern Block (Bloque Sur), a branch of the Central Bolívar Block (Bloque Central Bolívar) of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC—Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia), until 2006, when they were demobilized.

Under these conditions, I began my dissertation research in lower Putumayo. Despite my familiarity with the field site, changes resulting from the arrival of drug traffickers accompanied by armed groups—including the *campesinos*' stigmatization as growers of coca, an illicit crop, and an intensification of violent confrontations between guerrillas and paramilitaries—necessarily affected the focus of my research, and flexibility and adaptability with regard to the topic and field research methods became vital. If this could happen to someone as familiar with the region as I was, it could happen to any researcher native to the country but not necessarily to the area for which research is planned; and a foreign researcher would be even more strongly advised to learn as much as possible about a place where the armed actors and the characteristics of the conflict might change at any given time before proposing a research project and to be prepared to shape his or her topic according to such changing conditions.

Aspects of Conflict to Consider

When deciding on a topic and methods for research to be conducted in a violent place, native and foreign researchers alike should, for their own security, pay close attention to three aspects of conflicts. The first is whether control over a particular territory is disputed. This in itself presents a danger for any researcher who wants to establish his or her presence in a region for a project that entails conducting interviews or, even, asking questions. These activities may raise the suspicions of one or another party

to the conflict because they may be associated with intelligence gathering. The boundaries between areas controlled by different parties to a dispute may also be unclear or changeable, and the researcher should plan to avoid them.

The second consideration is a corollary of the first. Research should be based in a place whose control is undisputed and where codes of conduct are clear and can feasibly be followed. It will be important to limit activities to those we can confidently say pose no risk to anyone's safety. Consider ahead of time other ways to seek out information that cannot be gathered in the field. These could include consulting secondary sources or seeking out former members of an opposing group who may be demobilized and, as a result, perhaps live in cities and large towns and therefore are more accessible. Cities may be more or less distant from the research site, but they certainly offer greater security to field researchers than rural areas where we are constantly being watched.

Third, if research must be done in a disputed area, bear in mind that it's better to come and go than to stay in any one place for an extended period. The centrality of intensive long-term fieldwork to anthropological research raises the question of "the advantages and disadvantages of concentrated but synchronic field research versus field trips that are intermittent but recurring and lasting for decades" (Ramos 1990, 459). Alcida Rita Ramos reflects on the quality of research results that stem from the dense but synchronic observation of a community compared to an analysis of diachronic data reflecting the changes to the community over time. This distinction parallels the contrast between research fieldwork in isolated indigenous communities that require long stays in the field and research in conflict areas like Putumayo, where the positive or negative impact on the safety of researchers is an even greater concern than the nature and quality of research results. This greater concern needs to be taken into account when planning trips to the field, as longer stays in a disputed area may lead the people there to think they can identify the researcher with one or another party to the conflict.

A Practical Example of Stays Planned for Study of a Violent Place

In my own case, since the conflict in lower Putumayo was intensifying at the very time I was doing my fieldwork, I decided to limit my stays in any

given place to no more than a month at a time and to keep moving within a small region made up of several towns. I stayed with various relatives of a research assistant from Putumayo, an anthropology student in the nearby department of Cauca whom I introduced as my own student. My identity as a researcher from the capital city of Bogotá who was in the area with a student assistant generated the necessary trust of people in lower Putumayo, who allowed me to spend time and conduct interviews in various locations. By not spending too much time in any one place, I was able to avoid involvement in local dynamics that would tend to define me as an ally of one armed group or another in the intense and violent dispute for territorial control. My pattern of entering the zone and leaving to return to Bogotá after one or two months of work became a means of guaranteeing my safety. When I returned to Putumayo accompanied by my student, I was recognized as “that researcher” who worked in Bogotá and wrote about the region’s history.

To be able to spend longer periods of time doing fieldwork, I decided to base my activities while away from Bogotá in the southern “boot” of the department of Cauca, an area that borders on Putumayo. Guerrilla authority was strong there, and only with the guerrillas’ permission could I stay and work. I came to learn that this kind of permission was granted by word of mouth and passed along through civilians who lived in the area, in particular through a network of rural teachers that included my student’s uncle. That’s how word reached me that I would be allowed to stay and work in the area. I think getting the permission of the guerrillas was key to my being able to gain the confidence of some people in the community. After all, the guerrillas think of themselves as representatives of “the people” and thus feel the need to listen to local opinion and negotiate with key individuals and interests.

SEEKING ADVICE AND ASSISTANCE FROM LOCALS

The one absolutely indispensable approach to answering a great many essential questions about a dangerous place—and the research that can safely be conducted there—is to seek out advice from those who know it well. Ask other researchers or public officials who have worked in the area about who to contact when arriving in the field. Being able to tell people on the ground that one has been referred to them by someone they know helps the researcher to build confidence and find a local individual to accompany him or her and open doors in the community at the earliest stages of the process.

Oscar Jansson was a Swedish researcher who arrived in lower Putumayo to do predissertation research in 2002, when paramilitaries were already established in the area of Valle del Guamués, and returned in 2005 and 2006 to do dissertation research. While I had decided to stay in a guerrilla-dominated area, Jansson decided to spend more time where paramilitaries exercised control, so it was dangerous for him to run into guerrillas when he left those areas. His experiences point to the importance of traveling with a locally known person who can explain to the curious combatant or civilian just who the researcher is and what he or she is doing. Jansson comments:

I have traveled here with a friend who can vouch for me and testify that I'm not a *gringo*¹ in case we run into either the guerrillas or someone who might be a *miliciano*.² It certainly doesn't mean that the trip is safe—I'm told that the guerrillas may yet abduct me at least until my story is verified, which my peasant informants say may take months—but it's at least something. (Jansson 2008, 107)

At the time of Jansson's research, paramilitaries controlled the town centers of lower Putumayo and had set up checkpoints wherever civilians would enter or leave their areas of control. Travel was difficult between these checkpoints because the paramilitaries who worked there were very suspicious that unknown people passing through could be spies or underground members of the guerrillas and stayed on the lookout for anyone with physical characteristics that they associated with those kinds of people. These characteristics could include marks on the shoulders that indicated the use of a heavy backpack or the wearing of black t-shirts or high rubber boots, among other things. In one sense, then, it can be advantageous for the researcher to have a physical appearance atypical for the area because an evident outsider is less likely to be accused of being a spy or an underground member of an armed group.

Even a person presumed to be an outsider, however, should always follow the advice of community members on how to act and how to respond at checkpoints. To secure one's personal safety in a conflict zone, respecting the judgment of those who live in the region and are accustomed to navigating its dangers is always advisable.

CONTROLLING PERCEPTIONS: DEALING WITH ARMED ACTORS IN DISPUTED AREAS

My identity as “the researcher from Bogotá” served me well in dealing with local people as long as I remained aware of how they might react to it. This awareness was particularly important when interacting with armed actors in areas of conflict. Although I was not a foreigner, neither was I a member of the local community. The distinction became clear when, at one point, I was subjected to a friendly interrogation by a guerrilla *miliciano* who already knew about my research but approached me and my student, asking if I was the researcher from Bogotá who was studying “coca culture.” Based on other questions he asked me, I realized the nature of my project, financed by the Colombian Institute for the Promotion of Science and Technology, was known to the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC—Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia), the country’s largest guerrilla organization. I talked about my affiliation with the Colombian Institute of Anthropology and History, and he asked if he could visit me to get help in writing up a proposal for an environmental protection project in response to the *campesinos’* use of chemicals to treat coca leaf and produce coca base for sale to cocaine laboratories. I responded that he could visit me in my office in Bogotá, a public place that he could find on his own and where I could meet with anyone without raising suspicion. Having confirmed my role as a researcher engaged in a project that presented no threat to the guerrillas, he left me to continue my work.

In contrast, my research assistant decided to walk away when the *miliciano* approached us. Later I asked her why, and she said that while I would return to Bogotá, she would be staying in Putumayo, and she preferred not to be associated with a known *miliciano* so as not to subject herself to suspicion and to avoid any association of our work with the insurgency. One of the civilian population’s strategies of resistance to the armed actors is to steer clear of relations with any of them, thus avoiding any possibility of retaliation by their rivals. But as “the researcher from Bogotá,” I was treated differently by the *miliciano*, and my public conversation with him did not entail the same implications for my public persona as it would for a local resident.³ His perception—and that of other parties to the conflict—of me and my work was crucial to my ability to operate safely while in the field.

Presenting Oneself and One's Research

If you are to stay as safe as possible in the field, then you must first develop an awareness of how you may be perceived and, hence, an understanding of how to present yourself and your research. A significant risk comes from being suspected of taking sides in whatever struggle is going on. Following advice from community members is not always sufficient to avoid this appearance. You should always travel with an official letter from the institution with which you are affiliated stating you are a researcher, specifying where you are going, and indicating your line of research in very broad terms. I never traveled to Putumayo without such a letter from the Colombian Institute of Anthropology and History. Unlike the National University, the institute has no popular association with the political Left or with guerrilla groups. I would use my judgment on whether to present this letter depending on who was asking me for ID or wanting to know what I was doing in the region. At times it helped me pass through military checkpoints without problems, and it also helped me convince local government offices to provide me with needed information. A letter of this kind can help to legitimize one's role in an area with irregular armed actors as well, since—as the story of my encounter with the *miliciano* illustrates—they often recognize the work of researchers and the universities and research institutes with which they are affiliated.

Sometimes having more than one form of identification and being able to decide which is preferable in any given situation can be useful and even important to a researcher's safety. One researcher with two university ID cards, for example, can present a public university ID at guerrilla checkpoints and a private university ID to paramilitaries (Osorio 2006, 34). A foreign researcher can choose to present an ID from his or her home university or one from the local institution with which he or she is affiliated. With the country's armed forces, a passport may carry weight.

When asked about your research, frame your project as related to uncontroversial matters that do not arouse animosity or represent danger to you or the people you talk to in the field. When people asked what my student and I were up to, we would respond that I was writing a history of the region. Similarly, Jansson reports that upon his arrival at field sites, his presence was immediately noted, and comments, "Throughout my fieldwork, I received the same question countless times upon jumping off a truck just having entered a town. 'Who are you and what are you doing here?'" (Jansson 2008,

153). Jansson responded by referring to what most people recognize as anthropological research and saying he was studying indigenous traditions.

Even such a seemingly innocuous response as saying one is an anthropologist could carry risks in some quarters, however. Colombian researchers, for instance, are automatically seen in the light of the representations common in the armed forces about what an anthropologist or other social scientist does. They are stereotypically associated with the Left and therefore disliked, often leading to a default relationship that can be characterized as mutually suspicious. One researcher from Putumayo who worked mostly with active service members on a master's project reports that since his informants were inclined to distrust him,

the first thing I had to take into account in order not to generate mistrust from my informants was my own self-presentation. I had to consider my clothing, shoes, and hair as well as how I spoke, walked, and looked in order to figure out what worked best with my interlocutors in terms of how to carry and use my body when I was with them. (Culma 2013, 6)

If you are aware of these factors, you may be able to use them to defy stereotypes about particular fields of study or researchers more broadly.

Working with Official Forces and Paramilitaries

Knowing how one's nationality will affect how one is perceived by different groups and which approaches are most advisable to take with them will be another element in maintaining your security. Being from another country may not be a disadvantage. The foreigner may be more visible, but people may not be so inclined to associate him or her right away with any of the armed groups. This "state of grace"—though tenuous and perhaps temporary—can enhance your research as well as help keep you safe.

Similarly, a researcher's foreignness may affect in a positive way work involving, for example, the police and the military. Officers may be more forthcoming with a person who is not "contaminated" by domestic political discourse or prejudices. In fact, they may be glad to have the opportunity to "educate" foreigners about their version of the truth regarding a conflict. They may also feel it is important to provide a positive image of their country to a person who will be passing along the information in his or her home

country. One US anthropologist who has written about how being a woman affected her relations with military respondents (see more on this below) comments that “while gender certainly shaped my interaction, it was my ‘Americanness’ that got me in the door. My physical self, like my blue U.S. passport, was a constant reminder of the privileged weight attached to the idea of ‘America’” (Tate 2007, 19).

Being from another country has a very different effect in a place dominated by the guerrillas. On the positive side, it is common for guerrillas and members of paramilitaries to express curiosity about foreign countries and want to learn about them through the foreign researchers in their midst. They may also express a wish to visit researchers’ countries of origin someday. Many guerrillas have taken positions against foreigners, however, citing nationalist and anti-imperialist principles. For this reason, foreign researchers may run a greater risk in areas under their control and, in the worst of cases, may even be in danger of kidnapping. For example, one colleague who lived and had grown up in Bogotá but had been born in Switzerland was detained for a short time at a FARC checkpoint; based on his ID they considered him foreign. In this particular case he was able to convince them that he was for all intents and purposes Colombian, but most foreign researchers will not have such an argument at their disposal.

This example further highlights the importance of carrying an official letter of introduction from an institution or entity in the country, as mentioned earlier. A letter will serve as evidence that you are not connected directly or indirectly to military intelligence activities. If those who have detained you doubt the veracity of the letter, you can insist that they call the entity that produced it to verify your status.

In an interestingly mixed approach, Jansson used his advantage as a foreigner with official forces to reduce his disadvantage on the same basis with paramilitaries. “The paramilitaries’ general attitude of skepticism towards someone who seemed as obvious a stranger as I [was] could be handled by establishing social relations with police officers in the towns,” he relates. “This indicated, at least, that I was not a foreigner having arrived to socialize with or support the guerrillas in any way” (Jansson 2008, 14). This practice allowed him to carry out his fieldwork in an area dominated by paramilitaries known to have established a close alliance with the armed forces, which in Colombia included the national police (Human Rights Watch 2000). He established a particular friendship with the police commander in

La Hormiga after two patrolmen brought him in to explain who he was. Once there, the commander explained “the harsh treatment from his patrolmen as a matter of precaution—if the *milicianos* spot the police being too friendly with someone . . . they’re likely to kill the person” (Jansson 2008, 139). From that time on, the commander was careful to see that Jansson was not thought to be an enemy by the guerrillas and even mounted a police operation for this purpose “in case the *milicianos* were watching” (Jansson 2008, 145). The strategy enabled him to stay longer in the region.

Jansson was able to insert himself into an opportunity by taking advantage of the evident links between police and paramilitaries and even the alliances between police and drug traffickers, exposing police corruption in the process. Because he recognized the dynamics of the conflict in the region and as a foreigner presented no threat to the men with whom he established close relations, he was able to research corruption and trafficking networks from an inside perspective.⁴

Since, in the end, Jansson would return to his country, he was perceived as unconnected to the conflict. It would have been very hard for a Colombian researcher to do what he did because of the potential for being labeled a *miliciano* or someone seeking to gather information to deliver to an opposing group. This was the situation of the native Putumayan researcher mentioned previously, who says that before requesting an interview with the lieutenant colonel of an infantry battalion, “I had to prepare myself emotionally so that I could best react with my face, my voice, and my words to officers who might insinuate that I was a guerrilla or accuse me of being one” (Culma 2012, 5). He also considered the fact that he had studied sociology at the National University to be “counterproductive” because that university “was stigmatized as a hotbed of guerrillas from the time of Father Camilo Torres,” who had taught there but later became a combatant with the National Liberation Army (ELN—Ejército de Liberación Nacional) guerrillas (Culma 2012, 5).

The Putumayan researcher added, however, that “being from the area gave me more advantages than obstacles in my field work. It afforded me access to people and institutions that were important to my research, and the local knowledge and experiences of my upbringing provided information relevant to my topic” (Culma 2013, 8). Since he had grown up in Putumayo in an area close to a naval base, he had relatives working with the navy. In addition, his parents’ friends and neighbors included retired officers who trusted

him. Some granted him interviews, and others introduced him to brigade or battalion commanders.

In my own case, civilians in Putumayo discouraged me from presenting myself to military officials to make my presence known, due to their distrust of the armed forces at the time of my fieldwork. They preferred to stay away from military installations due to their fear and to “paranoia” (Culma 2012, 2) that they would be persecuted. The military had frequently accused my civilian respondents of being guerrilla collaborators, and civilians knew the army had alliances with paramilitary forces.

Even with the best advice, though, avoiding parties to a conflict who might pose a risk to one’s safety is not always possible, and it’s important to consider what precautions you must take in case such an encounter does take place. I can relate one anecdote about a time my decision to carry several copies of my book, *Between the Guerrillas and the State*, almost got me into serious trouble when I was searched at a police checkpoint. The cover of the book has a photo of a cow painted with the slogan “If they fumigate I’ll die” and *campesinos* carrying other placards against fumigation, the US Drug Enforcement Administration, and so forth. This striking photograph caught the attention of the policeman who was rummaging through my backpack, and he asked why I had three copies of the same book. I immediately remembered a conversation I’d had at the Institute of Anthropology about the book cover and the danger it could cause me because it was eye-catching and obviously a protest against the government policy of aerial spraying to kill coca crops. I had insisted the photo be used because it represented a public debate that was then taking place through the national ombudsman’s office and wouldn’t put me in danger. To my relief, the reaction of the police officer was to ask me for a copy of the book because he wanted to read it. Since I had been searched many times and nobody ever looked twice at any books I was carrying, I thought he was probably interested because it was a local issue, and I gave him a copy.

Finally, to avoid the appearance of taking sides in a conflict, it is important to remember communities are not internally homogenous and the researcher’s choices on whom to establish relations with will imply to others that he or she is affiliated with a particular subset of the population. It is of the utmost importance to understand the networks, alliances, and dynamics of the local conflict to avoid associations with people who could be considered enemies. You need to think about where you are working, how you are

perceived, and how your role and even your presence conform to the agenda of any armed actor with whom you may find yourself interacting in any way.

Gender Dynamics

While there's not much researchers can do about the differential treatment they receive from armed actors based on gender, it's important to be aware of it. One's gender can be an advantage or disadvantage—and can be used to one's advantage or disadvantage—depending on the circumstances. Men and women may have different experiences in different situations with the official armed forces, for instance, with men meeting with more obstacles in some cases and women in others. One female anthropologist, for example, comments that officers she approached for interviews “appear pleased with themselves for being able to explain such complicated issues to such ‘a lovely young woman’” (Tate 2007, 19).

Similarly, in discussing her work with the military in Guatemala, Jennifer Schirmer says,

As a woman researching a male-dominant institution, I have come to understand that, initially, officers perceive of me as a vulnerable and innocent woman in interviews. This is certainly a sexist attitude in many ways but one that, ironically, may provide an avenue into a world that might otherwise remain hidden, especially when one is considered naïve about issues usually associated with men, such as national security, guerrilla warfare and threat mentality. (Schirmer 1998)

I experienced this perception of innocence myself one day at a guerrilla checkpoint when, along with the other passengers, I was ordered out of a motorboat. Only the men were required to produce identification; the guerrillas had no interest at all in my presence or that of the other female passengers. In fact, perhaps because I am a Colombian woman, I haven't been personally detained for any kind of search since I've been working in Putumayo. Of course I've been searched at regular army checkpoints, where all passengers have to get off a bus, for example. At these checkpoints men and women are separated, and although we women are subject to being searched, it seems to be carried out less thoroughly than with the men.

On the other hand, being female can be more of a disadvantage when dealing with paramilitaries. Oscar Jansson was able to make contact with them for his research by going to a bar he had been told was a paramilitary gathering place and beginning a conversation with a paramilitary fighter “on leave” by offering him cigarettes. He saw this fighter a few more times and through him was able to make contact with some of his fellow combatants (Jansson 2008, 145–48). On another occasion, he made contact with the bodyguard of a drug trafficker from Cali, who told him a vehicle loaded with cocaine was about to leave Putumayo and “a police colonel with influence has been bribed, so the car will not be stopped” (Jansson 2008, 296). Jansson took the risk of asking permission to travel with them, and they agreed. A woman researcher would not have been able to do any of these things.

CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS WITH LOCAL RESIDENTS

When setting up interviews with civilians in a disputed area, consider who in the community may or may not be interested in the research, and approach only those who may be interested. The recognition of your commitment to writing about an area will enhance your security there, but it may take time to cultivate it. In my case, I have spent decades looking at different problems in one region. In doing so I have come to know people well and have gained their trust. Since I am recognized as a regional historian, people want to tell me what has happened so it will be recorded and made known in the national capital, where many decisions are made. They feel my work makes them visible, that the local situation will be made known nationally. They value my research results, and to some extent, they feel they benefit from them.

One must be aware of local codes of conduct at all times and as conscientious about following them as local residents are, even if they are imposed by illegal groups. The truth is that we may want to break the rules in the interest of gathering more information; for example, we may want to publicly interview someone opposed to those who control the area. However, this could be dangerous for ourselves and others.

In a context where people are being constantly observed, informal conversations may arouse less suspicion than formal interviews. Jansson comments that

the hostility of the paramilitaries against anyone peeking into their business . . . implied the necessity to listen a lot and ask

few questions. Nevertheless, since the fundamental means of obtaining information on the cocaine trade was the human encounter, this often implied that information had to be obtained during conversations, however extensive, which were not formally structured as interviews. . . . Simply having conversations made it a lot easier for them and me to downplay any risks that could be associated with more formal inquiries. (Jansson 2008, 14)

Particularly when dealing with civilians, you need to be sure to conduct interviews in places understood to be safe. As Osorio (2006) comments in her article, “Dime con quién andas y te diré de qué lado estás” (“Tell Me Who Your Friends Are and I’ll Tell You Which Side You’re On”), relations between researchers and people in the community can be compromising for both. For example, one woman told the researchers she was working with,

I need to ask you a favor, that you don’t visit me at home again. And we can’t talk on the street. It’s not that I don’t want to but some of the residents in this neighborhood are with “them” and they’re watching us all the time. I don’t want to have any problems and I don’t want you to have any. We can get together at the rectory because nobody really knows who you talk to there. (Osorio 2006, 40)

In this case, the church seemed to have been considered a neutral entity, but that may not always be the case. The important thing is, once more, to understand and remember what it means to be associated with one group or another in a conflict situation and behave accordingly for the safety of both your interview subjects and yourself.

In terms of the methods you use to conduct the interviews, be advised that cameras and sound recorders are particularly unhelpful in conflict areas because they may make the researcher seem like a spy who is seeking information, either for an opposing armed group or for state security forces. One native Putumayan researcher who photographed the outside of a police substation was quickly detained by two patrolmen who brought him to the commander for taking the picture without permission (Culma 2012, 13). One of the police also reported the researcher had been heard to inquire about the local presence of M-19 guerrillas in the 1980s, which was considered suspicious. The researcher was, in fact, interested in writing an account of

the conflict in the region, but he had described his project as a more general history and was forced to justify the question in the context of that goal. Despite having committed a security violation, he was not punished because he claimed to have a brother in the police (a tactic which, not incidentally, would not have been available to a foreign researcher), which was later confirmed to be true. He could have avoided this situation entirely, though, had he complied with security protocols and asked permission to take the picture.

Personally, I preferred not to take pictures, both to avoid suspicion and so as not to create any distance between myself and community members. Nor did I always record my interviews. As Jansson says, sometimes it's better just to talk to people informally and not record them. Eventually I did have an opportunity to record conversations without worry, thanks to the trust I had cultivated within the community, and because my student was from the area.

PAYING ATTENTION TO THE CONFLICT

Bad things can happen to researchers in disputed areas when they don't pay close attention to the historical moment and the day-to-day situation. Historian Darío Betancourt was studying organized crime in Colombia when he was "disappeared" and murdered on April 30, 1999. As Winifred Tate comments, "Since the escalation of political violence and increased polarization in the late 1990s, [research on violence] has become more dangerous [and] many anthropologists addressing the entrenched violence in Colombia must face becoming victims of violence themselves in the course of their research and publishing" (2004, 36).

Five days after Betancourt's murder, Hernán Henao, an anthropologist who directed the Institute for Regional Studies of the University of Antioquia, was shot dead in his office by paramilitaries under the command of Carlos Castaño.⁵ At that time, Castaño was beginning to consolidate the paramilitary AUC under his own leadership. Castaño explained that while other researchers had documented paramilitary activities without incurring reprisals, Henao was working in an area where rival guerrillas had brought journalists into the region "to smear the self-defense forces and work against us with their leftist [nongovernmental organizations]" (Aranguren 2001, 275). Castaño came to hold Henao responsible for the smearing because "we discovered [he] was in charge of organizing visits and accompanying

European journalists to the Peace Communities in Urabá” (Aranguren 2001, 276). In a conflict-ridden region, the armed actors go after civilian support, and researchers are not immune to regional dynamics.

It is essential that researchers maintain broad knowledge of the conflict where they intend to work, both at the current moment and in its historical development, in order to fully understand its possible manifestations and on this basis evaluate the feasibility of the proposed field research. It was not a coincidence that the deaths of Betancourt and Henao occurred in rapid succession. They took place in the early stages of the confrontation between guerrillas and newly consolidated paramilitaries under Carlos Castaño, which ushered in the struggle to define a new balance of forces and led to an intensification of violence.

Researchers can be faced with the problem of “ostensible alliances” (Osorio 2006, 34) imputed to them in polarized contexts, where external actors must not lose sight of the fact that “we are vulnerable to being construed as allies or enemies on the basis of expectations and representations that our presence generates. . . . Everything we do or don’t do constitutes information that will be interpreted by the parties to the conflict according to a set of codes particular to the context of war” (Osorio 2006, 40). It is important to be alert to variations in the intensity of the conflict, to be careful about relationships established with members of the community and with others, and to know how much to write about what is happening at any given time. Many researchers wait several years to publish findings that may be sensitive to armed actors. Once the local conflict has cooled down, findings can be published without risk to oneself or others.

Finally, I want to stress that when entering a conflict zone the researcher confronts not only danger and uncertainty but also constant changes to the conflict’s intensity and its dynamics, whose rapidity may take him or her by surprise. These challenges require the flexibility to adapt research to the context as it exists. One should also be ready to change course or postpone the research if a careful analysis of the dynamic context indicates it may not be wise to go forward at that particular moment.

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NOTES

1. In Colombian slang, a US citizen.
2. That is, a civilian man or woman who lives in the community and provides active guerrillas with information on military movements and activities.
3. I cannot stress too strongly that the vulnerabilities of research assistants may not always coincide with those of researchers and that their safety should be considered at all times.
4. Jeffrey Sluka discusses this kind of risk taking in his article "Reflections on Managing Danger in Fieldwork: Dangerous Anthropology in Belfast." He mentions the risks he took and the security strategies he used when working with combatants of the Irish People's Liberation Organization (IPLA). One such risk was illegally crossing the border with an IPLA commander on a trip to Dublin, despite the warning of a friend that British forces would kill him if he was discovered on a country road in the company of the insurgent officer. Sluka explains he did it "because I believed that he was in the best position to decide on the route we should take" and that "I only did this once, and I probably would not do it again" (Sluka 1995, 281).
5. Castaño admitted he had ordered the killing in a 2001 interview with journalist Mauricio Aranguren.

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