Dancing with danger: ethnographic safety, male bravado and gang research in Colombia

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Abstract: (100-150) This article considers the dilemmas and challenges of conducting fieldwork with youth gang members in Medellín, Colombia. It draws upon the author's experiences to develop the notion of 'ethnographic safety', where researchers learn to perceive and avert danger by gaining a 'feel for the rules of the game' (Bourdieu, 1992) in violent communities; it problematizes the role that the researcher's gender and 'male bravado' played in accessing and interviewing gang members; considers the ethical conundrums of building rapport with criminal subjects; and discusses the challenges of working in complex, chronically violent communities where there are no simple dichotomies between victims and perpetrators of violence.

Before the 1990s, literature that addressed danger when conducting research tended to refer to it as an aside, as a 'tale of the field' (Gill, 2004; Henry, 1966; Maanen Van, 1988). Danger was covered fleetingly in methods handbooks or was discussed informally in hallways and bars at conferences, despite the fact that numerous researchers had worked in risky contexts before (Kovats-Bernat, 2002: 208; Avruch, 2001). In 1986 Nancy Howell noted there had been scant response within anthropology to threats in the field, even though many researchers had first-hand exposure to insecurity, including assault, rape and murder (Howell, 1986; also Sluka, 1990: 124). To all intents and purposes 'staying safe' was left to individual intuition or nominal verbal advice from a supervisor or peer, and there was rarely any formal training. It is surprising then, that it was not until the 1990s that qualitative, and most significantly ethnographic scholarship[i], began to emerge that specifically addressed 'dangerous fieldwork'.

Howell went on to write the report *Surviving Fieldwork* (1990), although this covered potential occupational dangers in all fieldwork settings, and not the 'more exotic risks' concomitant with violent contexts (Avruch, 2001: 641). Taking on these more exotic tasks, Jeffery Sluka's *Participant Observation in Violent Social Contexts* in 1990 was a pioneering article that discussed the dangers of his fieldwork in a conflicted Belfast, offering a series of researcher safety recommendations. In the same year Peritore's techniques for 'field entry', promoted inter-personal relations to avert danger in Latin American (1990), which were quickly bolstered by collaborative efforts, notably, Raymond Lee's *Dangerous Fieldwork* (1995) and the *Fieldwork Under Fire* edited by Carolyn Nordstrom and Antonius Robben (1995). Courageous, self-reflective articles from Elizabeth Stanko and Eva Moreno[ii] (1995; 1992), and monographs based on ethnographies of violence from Nancy Scheper-Hughes, Phillipe Bourgois, Carolyn Nordstrom, and Michael Taussig provided sharp insights into the dangers of fieldwork (1995; 1993; 1997; 2003).

This period marked the aperture of scholarly attention to the subject (Avruch 2001) and since the turn of the millennium dangerous research has been increasingly discussed in edited collections (Arias, 2014; Greenhouse J. et al., 2002; Lee and Stanko, 2003; Linkogle and Lee-Treweek, 2000; McGee and Pearce, 2009; Mertus, 2009a; Smyth and Robinson, 2001) augmented by a raft of individual articles (e.g. Baird, 2009; Clark, 2012; Dixit, 2012; Gill, 2004; Goldsmith, 2003; Haer and Becher, 2012; Holmes, 2013; Rodgers, 2007; Wood, 2006), including those on sexual harassment and violence (Hanson and Richards, 2017; Huang, 2016; Keppley Mahmood, 2008; Ross, 2014).

Although there is still much work to be done, particularly with respect to the gender dynamics (recent exceptions include Durán-Martínez, 2014; Felab-Brown, 2014; Ramírez, 2014), in the last two and a half decades, publications on dangerous fieldwork have come in from the cold, moving from cautionary anecdotal tales, to occupy an increasingly rigorous position within the academy.

This is a self-reflective article that draws upon twenty months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted intermittently between 2006 – 2012 in the poor north-eastern corner of Medellín, the second largest city in Colombia. My research consisted of forty life-history interviews with male youth gang members, including leaders, *sicario*[iii] youth assassins, and *carrito* child members, to cast light upon the relationship between masculinity and gang membership. The fieldwork was dangerous, especially for a conspicuous looking Englishman, given the high levels of violent crime in the marginalised neighbourhoods of the city, but also because the research subjects themselves were the protagonists of much of this insecurity. Medellín's murder rate per 100,000 in the last decade ranges from 20 to 70, peaking at 388 in 1991,

compared to 1 in the UK in 2013 (Bernal Franco and Navas Caputo, 2013; García et al., 2012; UNODC, 2014). Legacies of violence weigh heavy upon the city formerly known as the cartel capital of the world and birthplace of the prototype drug baron Pablo Escobar.

Cities in Latin America and the Caribbean dominate the top ten murder rates in the world, and gangs are paradigmatic of this violence (UNDP, 2014). Researchers have been murdered in the region, including Myrna Mack Chang in Guatemala in 1990 and Ken Pryce in Jamaica in 1987 (Bloor et al., 2007: 18; Oglesby, 1995; Reddock, 1989)[iv]. Despite the vast amounts of scholarship dedicated to insecurity, very little draws on primary, empirical data with the gang members themselves, indicating the methodological challenges of such research (Rodgers and Baird, 2015). This raises hermeneutic questions around the interpretation of the 'gang problematic' and how it is presented in policy, where hard-line, top-down dictates, have thus far proved unsuccessful, or worse, counter-productive (Cruz, 2014; Wolf, 2015).

First, this article presents a series dilemmas from my field experience that researchers might learn from. Although Kovats-Bernat's calls for 'pragmatic strategies' for working in dangerous settings (2002: 208), this article resists being a narrow 'how to' guide or tool box. Why? To be frank, as an ethnographer I have never found lists of safety measures particularly useful, the prescriptive nature does sit comfortably with the uniqueness of fieldwork. In my experience, personal safety has depended on an intuitive feeling for what is, and is not, dangerous. This brings me to the didactic aim of this article; to provide insight beyond those rather static 'how to' safety guides, whilst being more substantial than a loose anecdotal run-through of risky encounters. To do this, and explain what I mean by an intuitive feeling for danger, I encourage the reader to develop 'ethnographic safety'[v] by acquiring local knowledge to build a deeper understanding of the risks and threats associated with each field

experience. Second, I demonstrate some of the quandaries faced when trying to comprehend young men and community violence, which invariably places strain on the researcher, where boundaries between perpetrator and victim blur as the social world doggedly refuses to confirm to neat moral categorization. Third, I consider two issues rarely broached in methodological literature; I discuss the ethical tightrope of 'romancing' the gang and getting too close, then consider the gendered aspects of gang research by critically unpacking the use of 'male patter' and bravado when bonding with gang members.

Talking to gang members: The rules of the game

Medellín's urban periphery suffers from what chronic violence (Pearce, 2007), where many poor neighbourhoods are reminiscent of 'frontier-like' settings (Belousov et al., 2007). Prior to entering Medellín's poor communities I spent several months interviewing local experts, academics and youth workers to map the history of violence in the city, simultaneously laying the foundations to understand the context I was about to enter. This was an ethnographic approach to safety as I accumulated local knowledge to better read danger, though my participant observation at community organization *Vivir-Juntos* located in the impoverished north-eastern mountainside of the city.

Vivir-Juntos acted as my port of entry to surrounding neighbourhoods and primary contact to develop safety mechanisms. The first mechanism was being streetwise, blending common-sense with local knowledge, avoiding *dando papaya*, a colloquial term for 'asking for trouble' through ostentatious public behaviour. As Goldstein notes, researchers can "adopt the local cultural and linguistic norms their subjects use to promote their own security [and that] researchers, regardless of discipline, can become 'ethnographers' of local violence [this involves following] the local lead, dressing in simple clothes and avoiding any overt displays

of wealth" (2014: 2, 12). When I first went to Medellín's poor neighbourhoods I was conscious of how different I looked, not just because I was a tall, relatively wealthy foreigner, but because of the way I carried myself, spoke and dressed. I wanted to be less conspicuous and keep a low profile on the street (also Felab-Brown, 2014) so I bought some polo-shirts and a cap similar to the ones my colleagues wore, mainly to cover my hair, which seemed to be much blonder than everyone else's. My cap became somewhat akin to child's invisibility cloak; it clearly did not make me invisible, but I *felt* less visible dressed that way, and, at least, people did not seem to stare at me as much on the bus. This was my first step in developing ethnographic safety: lowering my profile and not *dando papaya*, an implicit socio-cultural street behaviour that reduces the chances of criminal victimization.

Vivir-Juntos was also a gateway to contact gang members, as an organic part of a very close-knit community. The cousin of one colleague was a former gang leader murdered in the 1990s; another had a young nephew in a gang; the daughter of another was a former sex worker whose grandson was a quixotic mix, part gang member - part taxi driver; and so on. The inevitable proximity to gangs meant that *Vivir-Juntos* maintained an awkward relationship with their leaders, which they called *bailando*, 'dancing' with them. This was a euphemism for maintaining dialogue with gangs, delicately humouring them, whilst standing their ground to avoid becoming a victim of violence and extortion. Dancing then, with danger.

Pedro from *Vivir-Juntos* became a particularly close friend and informant. We would spend hours walking around nearby neighbourhoods as he conducted house-calls for his social work duties. Sometimes we would chance upon gang members. Pedro was well respected locally, and he often knew them or their parents, so he would make an introduction for me.

Depending on the encounter, I would arrange a meeting later or invite them for a coffee from a street vendor and conduct an impromptu interview. What took me by surprise was Pedro's cold-calling at gang members houses to arrange meetings, although he would only do this if they lived with parents he knew. This is precisely what happed when I interviewed el Mechudo and el Loco, who appear later in this article. I would often leave messages at gang members' homes with my mobile number if they were not in (they rarely called back), but normally we would conduct a swift search of the neighbourhood, and more often than not they could be found on nearby street corners or in a local bar as gang boundaries tended to be tight, restricting their movements.

When I found a gang member I chose how I would characterize myself (also Davis Rodrigues, 2014: 12; Goldsmith, 2003: 9) using distinctly 'male patter', 'Alright mate, how's it going? I'm with Pedro. I'm writing a book on the neighbourhood and wondered if you fancied talking to me about what it's like living here?' After the ice had been broken, I went on to explain that I wanted hear their views on gang life, followed by verbal informed consent, pitched in a way that was discursively legible to the respondents: 'Hey, I work at a university, not for the police nor nothin'. You don't have to talk to me or if you don't want to answer some question, no sweat. I don't even wanna know your real name, so no one can find out who you are anyway! Why not chose a nick-name for yourself, after your favourite footballer or whatever?' Although most were intrigued enough by the unexpected foreigner to agree to an interview, the process was not without flaws. Gang members are ephemeral characters and regularly turned up late to arranged meeting places, evening encounters meant they were likely to be drunk or high, and on numerous occasions they did not appear at all. The challenges of finding gang members and the high interview failure rate meant I felt

constant 'data anxiety', especially when I first went to Medellín as PhD researcher with completion deadlines looming.

Once I managed to sit down with these young men there were other difficulties. Despite candour about certain parts of their lives, such as why they joined the gang or the tough experiences of their upbringing, they often used ambiguous language around acts of violence they had committed. Moreover, that language was steeped in *parlache* slang, the bastard child[vi] of Medellín's street violence, with over one hundred words for killing, drugs and weapons, but tellingly not a single one for love (Castañeda Naranjo and Henao Slazar, 2005; Henao Salazar and Castañeda Naranjo, 2001). For example, *la vuelta*, the rounds could mean anything from collecting extortion money to killing people. I made 'strenuous efforts' (also Smyth, 2005: 20) to learn *parlache* and after a few months, my accent and way of speaking altered to the extent that my colleagues started calling me *el Paisa Inglés*, the English Colombian (from Medellín), and middle-class friends remarked that I sounded distinctly 'street' and swore too much. Absorbing linguistic norms in the field was a chameleonic practice, using 'cultural competence' (Smyth, 2005: 20) to adapt to the surroundings. This competence was important, not only for building the human relations necessary for effective ethnography and analysis, but also for understand risks and as a mechanism of perception control so as not to appear threatening (also Ramírez, 2014: 7–8). I incorporated it into my ice-breaking routine; when asking to voice-record interviews, I would say it was because I could not write and talk simultaneously, using the local term *no puedo mamar y silbar a la vez,* I can't suck and whistle at the same time. It proved effective as only two out of forty gang members refused to be recorded, and was a subliminal way of demonstrating I knew what I was talking about so they should be straight with me. Whilst I of course remained an

outsider, this meant that they would talk to me in their lexicon, on their terms, making us feel more at ease during interviews.

The youths were normally forthcoming about why they joined the gang and in justifying their acts of crime and violence, which reminded me of the adage that a criminal is 'just a victim whose story has not been heard'. However, getting beneath the skin of their narratives was much more challenging, and with a number of them I fell short, but it worked, it required concerted humouring combined with gentle cross-examination to avoid creating the inimical dynamics of inspection and scrutiny, which may have made them perceive me as a threat. Patience was paramount. After a while interviews would 'warm up' as the gang member relaxed, and more straight-talking and confessional information would emerge, where having a firm understanding of their local context and lexicon was vital to interpreting their narrative, a methodological advantage at the heart of good ethnography.

Working within the community organization acted as a *colchón*, literally mattress, or safety buffer. My colleagues were essentially grass-roots experts in danger mitigation and I tried to learn from them. Although violence ranges from organized and planned, to sporadic and emotive, over time I developed what Bourdieu calls an intuitive 'feel for the rules of the game', a type of 'practical sense' or *savoir-faire* that helped me to predict and evade danger (Bourdieu, 1992: 66, 81). This Bourdieuian feel for the rules of the game in dangerous contexts underpins 'ethnographic safety', where seeking advice from locals, recommended by Goldsmith, Peritore and Ramirez (2003; 1990; 2014: 5) should be used to build-up what Kovats-Bernat's terms a 'localized ethic' of safety (also Davis Rodrigues, 2014: 12; 2002; Goldstein, 2014). In this way, researchers can gain many danger mitigation skills that are second nature for locals. Ethnographic safety, rather than being conducted pragmatically as a

routine risk assessment procedure (e.g. Durán-Martínez, 2014: 12–15), is a form of normative awareness that becomes increasingly implicit, which may take months or longer. For example, Amy Ross spent "years and years with [her] mouth shut" to understand how to conduct research on human rights in Guatemala (2009: 180). Of course, we should still confer with trusted gatekeepers and locals about dangers, but ethnographic safety is not solely about relying on locals as a barometer for security, rather it is a process whereby the researcher actually acquires (at least some of) their expertise. Whilst risk assessment protocols can be a useful starter for contemplating these issues, researchers working in dangerous settings must accumulate knowledge, socio-cultural competence, and a feel for the rules of the game to be able to generate 'ethnographic safety', and this can only truly occur once in the field.

Experience is a fine thing for researchers. At some stage we are all neophytes 'fumbling' for contextual understanding (Goldsmith, 2003). I was a terrible interviewer when I started, stumbling through interviews, unable to develop rapport, misunderstanding *parlache*, pulling the conversation off-point or filling emotional silences with inane questions at precisely the wrong moment. I found it very instructive to listen back to voice-recordings, which helped me become a better interviewer. This process took some time and I had to trash quite a few early interviews. Frustrating at the time, but I now look back on it as a very necessary pathway to becoming a researcher. Overtime my ethnographic safety improved; I became better at reading the local texture of violence, when it may or may not occur, I identified the most reliable informants on gang movements, and learned how to approach them delicately so they would not feel harried. I came to understand that the rules of the game were akin to what Harris described as the 'moral arena' and 'normative order' (Harris, 1978 in Finlay, 2001: 61) around gang violence, through the accumulation of cultural data to develop a

sensitivity to oncoming dangers (see also Lee, 1995). Whilst imperfect, when "juxtaposed against the chaos of the field" (Kovats-Bernat, 2002: 210), this normativity made local violence seem less anomic and more predictable.

Vivir-Juntos were generous gatekeepers, colleagues and friends, but despite their support, danger could never be completely allayed, and ultimately, I was responsible for my own welfare and decision-making. Although 'the field' is a methodological abstraction, it is of course real life. It is not uncommon for researchers to get pulled into uncomfortable situations. Although we might like to think we will react appropriately, 'data anxiety', nerves, bad luck and simple misjudgement, affect our behaviour. 'Operational' approaches to security such as the exit strategies used by humanitarian practitioners in conflict settings (e.g. Mertus, 2009b) are not necessarily appropriate for lone ethnographers, where safety often depends upon our reactions, capacity for 'improvisation', 'quick thinking', 'flexibility' or 'malleability' to negotiate unexpected dangers that inevitably arise[vii] (Goldsmith, 2003; Goldstein, 2014; Kovats-Bernat, 2002). We might think through 'strategies for improvisation' (Kovats-Bernat, 2002: 210), but this begs the question: how do we know how we will react in situations of imminent danger and extreme stress? Even with experience, when something does go awry our reactions can vary dramatically: I panicked with the crowd when caught in a terrorist bomb blast in Pakistan, but when I witnessed a murder in Trinidad was calm enough to record a testimony from the dying victim that was later used in prosecution. The following Field Diary[viii] entry reflects on a precarious meeting with a gang member in Medellín:

Field Diary, 12th Oct 2011: Wednesday night with gang member El Mechudo

Met Pedro [from *Vivir-Juntos*] and his wife Wilma at 6pm who were taking me to see el Mechudo. As usual we left late after a series of delays. It was almost 8pm which made me worry as el Mechudo is not only a local gangster but also an alcoholic drug addict, and meeting him late usually meant he was messed up. This ruins the quality of the interview and is pretty dangerous and he is normally armed and has killed a quite a few people since he began as a teenage *sicario* [assassin].

With these thoughts in mind, Wilma, Pedro and I headed up to the corner that was his hang-out and drugs sales point. As we approached, el Mechudo spotted me and raced down the steps to the street and embraced me as a long-lost friend, offering me *aguardiente* booze, which I didn't want but felt obliged. I couldn't think of an excuse quick enough as he was pressuring me, so took a very small swig, pretending it was bigger so it didn't look bad. Then he offered it to Pedro who said he couldn't because he had 'bad colic'… I wished I had thought of that, but Pedro is an experienced community worker so he knows how to *bailar*, or swerve these things, without pissing anyone off. Pedro left me and el Mechudo to head up the dozen or so steps to chat, and said he would be in the café below with Wilma.

El Mechudo was now 28 years old, and the younger lads he was running on the corner looked like they were in their late teens. The 'interview' was really me firing a few questions and him replying with one-liners before drifting off onto another topic. He had been drinking since morning and was making little sense. I asked about his brother (el Loco) who was in jail and we tried unsuccessfully to call from my mobile phone to his prison cell in comedic fashion. I would have laughed at el Mechudo's drunken attempts at punching in the numbers, but I was nervous and a little frightened, so I humoured him. I was trying to *bailar* a little.

He asked for a few pesos to buy some drink. I slipped my hand into the back pocket of my jeans where I had deliberately put only $4,000 pesos (US$2) and passed them over. The $20,000 and $50,000 notes were stashed in my front-left pocket. He said he could find me a

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pretty girl if I wanted. I replied that that would be great, but I deflected and half-joked that I would probably end up with the girlfriend of some gangster and get shot. He said that if I was with him nothing would happen to me. He started laughing, so I joined in.

As we sat, el Mechudo smoked a whole joint and took a couple of bumps of cocaine off the end of a key. At 28 years old, he had the wizened face of a long-term drug addict. I said I would pop up and see him during the day for a chat as I would be around for a while. We hugged, he laughed, said we were *buenos parceros* [good mates] and I headed down the steps where Pedro was waiting. He had been keeping a beady eye on me the whole time from the street below. El Mechudo had noticed this and said 'ha, ha, he's worried about you! Don't worry *parce*, you're with me.'

Goldstein has advised ethnographers of violence to take "extreme caution" (2014: 1), but this is open to interpretation. Amy Ross recently asked "How can one seek safety when trying specifically to study the absence of security?" (Ross, 2009: 197) Further, Kovats-Bernat calls for 'a level of investigative flexibility' as ethnographers cannot always be expected to work in complete safety, and both he and Peritore suggest that some risk-taking is permissible when 'repaid' with good quality data (2002: 210, 211-212; 1990). I am not suggesting that researchers throw caution to the wind, but rather recognise that most will face exposure to personal hazards at some time in the field (Howell, 1990), hence, we should rightly expect that ethnographers of violence will not be able to assuage risk completely.

In my case, whilst conscious of not wanting to display bravado around my choice of methods, nor write a sensationalist account that valorises "the risk-taking, intrepid, white and male ethnographer star" (Huang, 2016), I could not have ventured into my research site if I was cautious in the extreme. As Hannah Gill surmised, "rules of personal safety are based on

sticking to the familiar – the antithesis of anthropological research" (2004: 5). I felt that I was a cautious ethnographer as I mentally calculated risk-taking against the data I desired, but caution is a relative notion. I took a visiting friend from the UK to my fieldwork area who told me 'you do realize you're fucking bonkers?' This perspective flags up the juxtaposition of outsider inexperience with the researcher that has developed ethnographic safety, the inference being that as ethnographic safety increases over time, correspondingly risk diminishes, as do our sentiments of vulnerability.

As a rule of thumb, I tried to avoid interviewing gang members at night because they were all bar none, either heavy drinkers or drug takers and normally both, which were chiefly evening activities. Furthermore, most murders and turf wars occurred at night, more so on weekends. I first assumed in my Field Diary that el Mechudo's level of intoxication 'ruined' the interview, in hindsight, it proved to be an informative encounter, not for the verbal content of the interview, but for the observational insight into gang members' nocturnal lives on the drugs corner. However, most of my interviews were conducted during the day when they were not obviously engaged in criminal activities as I had decided that some gang spaces were too perilous to enter frequently. My ethnography was not 'edgework' where the "researcher puts [themselves] in the risk position of the research participants" (Bloor et al., 2007: 20; a good example is Holmes, 2013). I did not strive to experience certain risks of gang life or death, such as gang warfare, that crossing the 'edge' could imply (also Goldsmith, 2003: 17).

This begs the question; what was the impact upon the research of not spending more time with gang members at night? Inevitably, this placed distance between myself and some of their lived realities, which made decisions to err on the side of caution frustrating ones (see

also Gill, 2004; Goldsmith, 2003: 9). Interestingly, this decision prompted methodological improvisation as I attempted to fill lacunae in my research by using a less risky approach to spending time with gang members at night: I went out with non-gang friends on what we called *parches de observación*, observational group nights out, to the spots where gang members hung-out and partied, which ultimately proved insightful (see Baird, 2015). From this I learned that flexibility and lateral thinking are indispensable in dangerous contexts when trying to secure the desired data, as is coping with the frustrations of drawing an ethical line in the sand.

I thought I handled el Mechudo reasonably well that night with a "dummy wallet" (Goldstein 2014: 12) of $4,000 in my back pocket, but the risk in the encounter was palpable as el Mechudo was armed, unpredictable and intoxicated. What disturbed me most was the fact that Pedro, a veteran social worker, was getting increasingly agitated as the interview drew on, and I would catch glimpses of him coming out of the café below looking up at me anxiously. I trusted Pedro, he always had my back, but I had never seen him like that before. His body language was a somatic early warning system for potential danger, a canary in the cage.

Pedro was also implicated in the risks of this scenario. He knew el Mechudo and had introduced us, so if anything were to go wrong this could also put him in harm's way. A gatekeeper was murdered following a research project in Russia (Belousov et al., 2007) and it is an ethical prerogative of researchers not to put them in harms way (see also Davis Rodrigues, 2014; Osorio, 2014). That said, Pedro was also a veteran of 'dancing' out of trouble, el Mechudo addressed him formally implying that he respected, and Pedro also knew his parents. These factors put him in a relative, if fragile, position of safety.

This brings me to the second Field Diary entry. It is important to stress that across twenty months of fieldwork this was the only instance that I ever felt my personal safety was seriously compromised, I was never physically harmed, and unease about safety is far more common than actual accounts of violent victimisation (Bloor et al., 2007: 16; Wood, 2006).

Field Diary, 18th Sept 2011: Death threat or 'marking territory'?

Yo [gang member] turned up late for the interview and we'd run over, it was like 10pm when we were leaving Maria's [from *Vivir-Juntos*] house. As we wound our way up the steps to the main street we passed the usual gang hanging out on the corner. Maria knew that I wanted to interview gang members and before I could stop her was over there telling them she was 'with a gringo' who was *investigando* [investigating] gangs. This put them on edge as there was an informant in the neighbourhood and gang members' houses had been raided by the police recently. Consequently, a number were now *en Canadá* ['in Canada', a play on words from *encanado*, to be locked up].

The leader turned to the others and said rhetorically 'who's gonna talk to him? I'll talk to him'. He was threatening and wide-eyed, probably wired on coke, and they were all swigging from bottles of *guaro*. I noticed they didn't have guns on display (they are normally hidden a few feet away so they can't be arrested for firearms possession, but close enough to grab if needs must). The leader was older than the others, say mid-thirties, with a shaved head. I was nervous but tried to act cool as he was getting aggressive. He pointed his index finger to my face, it felt like it was an inch from my nose. I tried hard not to flinch, I don't remember if I did. He said 'I could fucking kill you right now and no one would ever catch me'. I was scared shitless and trying not to panic as I felt the blood drain from my face.

Something instinctual kicked in. I switched into my interview routine of ice-breakers, saying that I wasn't there to judge anyone, I didn't want to know their real names, I wanted to know why kids ended up in gangs, I could empathize with their situation, that sort of thing. I managed to talk him down and he became less aggressive, more pliant. In the end, he even invited me back to interview him the following week [I never went].

Shortly afterwards I got on a bus down to town with *Vivir-Juntos* colleague Moses. He said that the *duro* [gang leader] was just testing me to see how I'd respond, *marcando territorio* (marking territory) to show he was the boss, teeing me up to extort money out of me later. He didn't *actually* intend to kill me.

Following this incident, I ended up staying out of the neighbourhood at night for a few weeks on the advice of Moses. Whilst the sense of fear I felt is difficult to translate onto the page, it did inform the research, becoming datum in itself, where feelings of vulnerability helped me grasp certain realities of the field better (similarly noted by Kovats-Bernat, 2002: 212–213; and Peterson, 2000: 195). Being threatened brought me closer to the boundaries of Bourdieu's rules of the game, and what locals meant when they whispered about the *calma tensa*, tense calm, the psychological grip generated by fear that gangs held over the community. When I switched into my interview routine to placate the gang leader, I later realized I was *bailando*, dancing, to reduce the chances of becoming a victim. Dancing was a survival skill learned from local colleagues and my experiences with gang members, a performative expression of ethnographic safety. I also realised that I needed to brief my colleagues about safety better, reminding Maria that I would rather meet gang members in the day, and that using the word 'investigating' made me sound like a policeman. Using locals for security is not automatically reliable then. Despite the insights from this experience, I

would not volunteer to put myself in the same situation again. Ethnographic safety is as much about learning what not to do, as what to do.

Understanding young men in violent communities

Across Latin America there are multiple masculinities, however the hegemonic version commonly reproduced is the archetypal *macho* man (Gutmann, 2003), culturally linked to gender inequality, material wealth, sexual competence and a capacity for violence (Baird, 2017). However, gender identities are in a constant process of becoming (Butler, 2011) characterized by ontological inconsistency and pliability (Connell, 2005; Greig, 2010). Gang members are not permanently committed to one exacting pattern of masculinity, nor should we refer to a uniform pan-regional *machismo*. They may be violent on the streets, and caring fathers or sons at home, meaning there is no clear-cut dichotomy between 'antisocial' gang members and 'prosocial' Others. Their behaviours are situationally dependent and multi-faceted. This poses definitional challenges around 'maleness' given the range of potentially oppositional identities and performances. In Medellín, Vélez Saldarriaga has written about *sicarios* who kill for money and are quick to sexually assault women at parties, whilst showing respect and love towards their mothers at home (1999). Moral dilemmas are a common occupational hazard of fieldwork (discussed by De Laine, 2000), but encounters with violent subjects throw up stiff challenges for researchers "where categories of 'victim' and 'perpetrator' are far from separate and static" (Ross, 2009: 181). Kimberly Theidon puts it eloquently:

To conduct research in these settings is to operate in the gray zone. We work with complicated victims who may blur tidy moral binaries, and we also engage with the perpetrators and "violence workers"… Some of these people may appal us; others may

become friends we care about very much. A sizeable segment will fall into both categories at different moments in time (2014: 2–3)**.**

I first interviewed el Mechudo in 2008 at his home where he lived with his parents. I remember being struck by the affection he showed his mother. Then his elder brother, el Loco, did the same. The brothers laughed and joked with me, gave me *tinto*, the omnipresent sickly-sweet coffee, as we talked about football and girls. They even asked me to go out drinking with them. They were approachable and likeable young men, if a little rough round the edges. It transpired during the interviews that el Mechudo joined the gang as a *sicario* assassin at the age of 14 and had murdered numerous people for seemingly insignificant amounts of money. El Loco went on to talk about drowning 'long-haired undesirables' in the reservoirs above his house to 'take care' of *barrio* security. There are also many accounts of rape attributed to gang members (Baird, 2015). One of my key gatekeepers shocked me with his homophobia ('I don't want that faggot near my son') and beat his wife on at least one occasion during my time in Medellín ('sometimes it needs to be done'). Another supposedly 'prosocial' youth ended up colluding with organised criminals and paramilitary organisations. Perhaps one of the most confounding situations occurred when I was drinking beer after work with colleagues Pedro and Fausto. It had been a long day, Pedro and I had been *pateando*, walking through the neighbourhood all afternoon, so we met Fausto at a *chuso*, a hole-in-the-wall shop protected behind metal railings, selling cheap *Pilsner* beer. Several beers later feeling a little worse for wear, I called it a day and took the bus home. In the morning, as I was entering work at *Vivir-Juntos*, Pedro came out suddenly, grabbed me by the elbow and pulled me away from the office out of earshot. He told me that moments after I left the night before, a man came down the road and started an argument with the owner of the *chuso*. A skirmish ensued and the owner grabbed some scissors off the counter and stabbed the man *en*

el mango, se murió, 'in the heart, he died'. From this tragedy, what lingered in my mind was not the murder itself, perhaps I had become accustomed after spending so much time in a violent neighbourhood, but rather Pedro's response, bearing in mind he was a local social worker: 'Look this guy was a son of a bitch, he beat his wife, and even his own family didn't like him, and anyway, he started the fight' (sic). Fausto, a respected community leader, had gone to parley with families on both sides to avoid revenge violence and broker informal financial reparations for the bereaved. When I asked about the police he replied incredulously *no guevón*, 'no way mate'. We never spoke about it again.

Pedro's reactions to murder reminded me of Daniel Pecaut's 'banality' of everyday violence in Colombia (1999) and Michael Taussig's observation that it "is almost impossible to be continually conscious of the state of emergency in which one lives. Sooner or later one makes one's accommodations to it" (in Scheper-Hughes, 1995: 416). Certainly, I felt I was conducting research in Theidon's 'gray zone'. It was a rich tapestry to be part of, and I marvelled, in the vein of Nancy Scheper-Hughes, at the "uncanny ability of locals to hold terror and misery at arm's length (1995: 416-417). However, this was a morally confounding process that led to self-questioning and anxiety about how to behave ethically, which had a cumulative impact upon my mental health[ix].

Romancing the gang and moral dilemmas

If ethical research depends on the way we treat others (Hallowell et al. 2005: 149), how should the researcher relate to a gang member whom engages in violence and crime? Scholastically, I have argued that youth gangs in Latin America's cities can be interpreted as socially generated epiphenomena of systems of exclusion (Baird, 2017; Rodgers and Baird, 2015). I often felt torn between sympathy for the frequently traumatic childhoods and sheer

structural violence gang members faced, and a moral rejection of their violence that tore at the community fabric. These tensions are familiar to researchers of vulnerable but violent youth (e.g. Dixit, 2012: 142–143) and bring to mind Jean-Paul Sartre's line that we are 'half victim and half accomplice, like everyone else' (1948).

As I was not trying to pin-down specific times and dates of crimes, but rather understand why young men joined gangs, my questioning tended to come from an empathetic stand-point. This encouraged open conversation and I noticed they often enjoyed talking to me. Nonetheless, I had to be mindful as the "scripts of violence" (Hume and Wilding, 2015) often emphasized their victimization and justified acts that victimized others. Given my positionality, my readiness to empathize in an effort to understand them (also see Clark, 2012: 834), I had to be cautious of 'over rapport' (De Laine, 2000) and drifting into a kind of Stockholm Syndrome with gang members. Fundamentally, decisions around proximity to violence and risk in the field are ethical ones: Should we engage them when they are taking part in activities such as drug trafficking or even murder? Alice Goffman provoked a stormy debate when she described accompanying a young man connected to her research in Philadelphia, on an alleged mission to shoot a rival (2014). This led to accusations of criminal complicity, whilst raising ethical debate about researcher relations with criminal subjects when embedded in the field; what is unavoidable, what is acceptable, what is 'too close'? (Lubet, 2015). These are complex issues that require debate, but advertent accompaniment of research subjects in acts intended to victimize others is unethical. When the researcher crosses an ethical line in pursuit of the data they covet, they have made a moral trade-off, and their wilful presence arguably legitimizes discourses of violence in the field no matter how critical the posterior write-up may be.

Donna Haraway flagged-up the dangers of romanticizing the less powerful and claiming to see from their positions, whilst exempting them from critical examination (in Finlay, 2001: 68). We cannot hope to understand gangs without considering the structural violence of exclusion, poverty, racism, et cetera. However, we should caution against romanticizing gangs as emancipatory projects given the negative impact of violence, crime, and fear upon host communities. Of course, not all ganglands are equal, and levels of harm and predation upon the local population vary, often becoming worse as drug trafficking becomes increasingly central to a gang's modus operandi (Pearlman, 2010; Rodgers and Rocha, 2013).

I did not become close friends with any gang members; most I met once or twice, and only a handful such as el Mechudo, more than that. However, when el Mechudo bounded down the steps to greet me as a like a long-lost brother I remember feeling uncomfortable and a little guilty. His emotions were enhanced by alcohol and cocaine at the time, but to generate the data I hankered after I had given him the impression that we were pals. He was not well considered by locals, and definitely not by my colleagues at *Vivir-Juntos*. This poses ethical conundrums for researchers to consider: When does humouring become over rapport or disingenuous; have we traded our critical edge to create an 'illusion' of amiability to get the data (see also Robben, 1995; Kovats-Barnet, 2002: 212); what should we do when conflicted by fondness towards individuals whose violent actions we morally reject; are we vulnerable to romanticizing gangs if our positionality is empathetic, and; do gang member narratives that consistently highlight their own victimhood garner pathos and influence our critical ability; and if we do not clearly reject discourses of violence, whether they come from gang members of gatekeepers, are we (inadvertently or not) legitimizing them?

I have been critical of Goffman above, but I also empathize with her position. Turning the critical lens inwards, I recognise I made some ethically dubious decisions, a type of moral economy of gang research where I accepted trade-offs to 'get the data'. When one colleague came out as a homophobic wife-beater, I did not challenge him strongly enough, I shrunk from confrontation, which on reflection was a less than conscious way to preserve our relationship as he was my prize gatekeeper. To get el Mechudo to open-up I continued to play along as his buddy despite the violent crimes he confessed to me and even after I felt an undercurrent of disapproval from colleagues at *Vivir Juntos*. Most challengingly of all, when the shopkeeper was murdered with the scissors and *Vivir Juntos* dealt with the situation without informing the police, what was my reaction? I felt privileged, even flattered, that Pedro had shared the secret with me, it made me feel like a good ethnographer, an insider, which is why I only asked if the police had been informed, but shied away from suggesting they should be. In these instances, my (re)actions were in some way complicit, legitimizing discourses of violence within the community. The reality is that in chronically violent communities discourses of violence abound, so researchers are compelled to occupy position of conformity to exist within that context. These are some painful realities in the field where the researcher, like everybody, is ethically imperfect. However, it is important that when researchers get the chance, we should admit to this.

Access to gang members is deeply gendered. At the beginning of interviews, I would connect by leaning on my own male construction; I habitually began conversations by talking about football, beer, or women, the usual gamut of what might be called 'male patter' to ingratiate myself as 'one of the boys'. Whilst this is effective for male researchers (Bourgois, 1995; Rodgers, 2007), the same avenue is not open to females (Theidon, 2014: 5). I drew on my 'maleness' to build bonds in search for a common ground, a process I found comfortable and

familiar. This opened doors to 'manly' gang activities such as violence, guns, partying, fighting, sex with women, and the like. In part, male patter was advantageous for data collection, but it set a particular tone, meaning that gang members were less likely to discuss the emotional burden of quotidian violence, fear or loss. Here I am reminded of a conversation with a senior female scholar; if male bonding is not open to female researchers, others routes potentially are. When she interviewed gang members in a Latin American city as a young woman, she could create intimacy and access certain types of information uncommon in man-to-man conversations. Many years later she returned to the same community and was perceived as the 'friendly grandmother' by gang members, which facilitated emotional and confessional responses. One can certainly imagine the potential divergence of qualitative data sets between 'one of the boys' and the 'friendly grandmother'.

'How close is too close?' remains a dilemma for which no answer seems truly satisfactory. I have never reconciled myself entirely with the relationship I built with el Mechudo, that my humouring may have legitimised his violent discourse, nor the fact that male patter and overspill into bravado during interviews had become one of my methods. Even though I tried to eschew the patter after the ice had been broken, it was often difficult to change the tonal course. As a gender specialist, the irony was not lost on me that I had manufactured a masculine hegemonic dialogue between researcher and subject. Nor is male bravado easy to switch-off beyond the field for ethnographers of violence, where embellished stories of near misses are exchanged nonchalantly at conferences. As Theidon noticed "in numerous conversations I have found myself listening to male colleagues engage in one-upmanship on the 'horror index.' Just who has seen the goriest scenes, the most battered bodies, dodged the heaviest rain of bullets?" (2014: 5) I have caught myself doing this; criticizing a colleague's field site on urban insecurity because it 'wasn't really that violent, not like Medellín'; or

when I was a young PhD researcher at a conference showing photos of mourners crying over the coffin of a murdered community leader. I was rightly criticized that they were not central to the argument I was putting forward, and thus gratuitous. Lessons learned. To turn to Theidon one last time: "learning to pay attention to how we do and do not respond to research and writing on violence—learning the impact this work has on us for better or worse—is part of developing our professional selves" (2014: 6).

Conclusion

There is a growing body of scholarship dedicated to dangerous fieldwork, ethics approval processes are now the norm to secure research funding, and there has been an increase in post-graduate training to address field risks. Nevertheless, research in violent settings or with violent subjects remains fraught with challenges. The forty life-histories I conducted with gang members over twenty months equate to just one successful interview per fortnight. This poses stiff challenges for research agendas, as the multiple caveats of safety, subject access and time, contribute to the scarcity of first-hand gang ethnographies in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The intention of this article has not been to dismiss safety guides, rather to argue that each researcher working in dangerous settings, whether they are ethnographers or not, ought to consider how they can develop 'ethnographic safety'; the capacity to read, predict and respond to the textures of insecurity in the field and to gain an intuitive feel for Bourdieuian rules of the game. I realised that my 'dancing' with gang members to stay safe was behavioural; I had come to behave like, and hence resemble, locals who did the same. Ethnographic safety is about the researcher responding to the locality, it is a chameleonic practice, a process of becoming.

Within the epistemic community of ethnographers, closeness in interpersonal relationships during research are assumed as fundamental, and the self-referential and rather deprecating term 'trafficker of secrets' is sometimes heard[x]. In violent communities, these relationships can feel like walking an ethical tightrope, but it is the responsibility of the researcher to draw some semblance of an ethical line in the sand attempt to respect it, no matter how tempting the data is that lies beyond.

Leaning on my own gendered construction to develop 'male patter' to bond with young gang members was a double-edged sword; on the one hand, it was an effective tool for opening interviews, on the other my performative masculinity reproduced dynamics of bravado which influenced their responses and was not easy to step back from afterwards. This not only created a 'gendered shape' to the data I obtained, it also prompted cycles of hegemonic masculine discourse between myself and the subjects. It also formed the basis of ethically opaque friendships with gang members such as El Mechudo, raising questions about how these engagements legitimize discourses of violence.

This article has not always been easy to write, but I have found some catharsis from confessional elements. There are no easy answers to many issues raised on these pages, but asking them and reflecting honestly about our experiences through 'warts-and-all' scholarship is a vital step towards promoting more ethical and safer research in dangerous contexts.

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[i] In 2003, as a Criminologist, Goldsmith noted that he had to 'look to anthropology' for publications on danger in the field (Goldsmith, 2003). However, recent publications on gathering quantitative data in violent settings have emerged such as Osorio (2014) and Haer and Becher (2012).

[ii] A pseudonym used by the author in her book chapter 'Rape in the Field: Reflections of a survivor'.

[iii] A sicario is a child assassin, normally between 12 and 15 years old. They came to prominence in the 1980s when drug cartels employed them as hit-men. The word comes from *sicarius* in Latin, meaning 'man of the dagger'.

[iv] See http://www.myrnamack.org.gt/ cited 22/04/2016.

[v] I drew inspiration for the term 'ethnographic safety' by combining Goldstein's article where he discusses becoming an 'ethnographer of violence and personal safety', with Kovats-Bernat's ideas around grasping the 'localized ethic' to mitigate insecurity (Goldstein, 2014; Kovats-Bernat, 2002).

[vi] Inspiration taken from (Pengalese, 2008)

[vii] The need for methodological flexibility has also been noted in quantitative research in conflict settings (Haer and Becher, 2012).

[viii] The field Diary notes have been tidied up to remove typographic errors and improve clarity for publication purposes, but are an accurate reflection of events as I recorded them at the time.

[ix] This article does not seek to cover mental health significantly, but useful further reading includes: Goldsmith, 2003; Mahmood, 2008; Moreno, 1995; Theidon, 2014; Wood, 2006.

[x] As said by Kimberly Theidon, Fletcher School, as Latin America Studies Association congress as discussant on the panel 'Cleansing, Corruption, and Covert Ops: The War on Drugs in the Northern Triangle' Session Organizer: Anthony W Fontes, University of Wisconsin, Madison, May 2016.