

Dangerous Fieldwork

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Dangerous Fieldwork

Dangerous fieldwork takes place in contexts in which violence is commonplace, or with subjects who often use violence, elevating the risk of victimisation for both researcher and research subjects. This might include conducting fieldwork in or around conflicts, in settings beset by social and criminal violence, or with armed combatants, criminals, gang members, prison inmates, and a broad range of ‘high-risk’ research subjects. Whilst danger can vary dramatically depending on contextual factors beyond one’s control, researchers can think through how to engage with the field and others around them to reduce risks. The golden rule, insofar as it is possible to have one, is ‘know your context’.

The importance of a discussing dangerous fieldwork is evident by its very definition, but there are two main points to be set out clearly. First, personal and subject safety are fundamentally about ethics, that is, researchers are moral-bound to make the best possible choices in the field. Admittedly, this encourages the vagaries of subjectivity, but the ethics of research in dangerous places is about how researchers treat others and how they behave to stay out of harm’s way. Researchers would do well to remember that when leaving the field, life there continues, and that in the past gatekeepers have been murdered after researchers have left. Whilst it is now the norm for research proposals to pass through university ethics committees, the burden is upon researchers to make the best judgement calls possible in the field. The ‘field’ is, of course, an epistemological abstraction, but it is also real life, as are the dangers associated with it. Researchers have been tortured, killed, abducted, raped, and disappeared in recent history. Ken Pryce (Jamaica, 1987), Myrna Mack Chang (Guatemala,

1990), and Giulio Regeni (Egypt, 2016) were all murdered because of their research activities, and Eva Moreno (1995) and Cynthia Keppley Mahmood (2008) were raped in the field. That being said, it is important to temper this with knowledge that unease about safety is far more common than researchers actually coming to harm.

This begs the question, why conduct dangerous fieldwork in the first place? It is about the legitimacy of the research process itself. For example, despite the abundance of scholarly literature dedicated to urban insecurity in Latin American and the Caribbean, precious little draws upon primary, empirical data with the gang members at the heart of this violence (Rodgers & Baird, 2015), a trend of non-engagement with dangerous subjects that is common in other fields of research. This raises hermeneutic questions around the interpretation of insecurity: how can researchers legitimately scrutinise these issues and claim they are methodologically rigorous without speaking to the protagonists of violence or entering their worlds? In short, there is academic—therefore policy, programming, and a real-life impact—to engaging with dangerous spaces and subjects.

Second, some scholars have called for the use of descriptive ‘how to’ guides or safety tool boxes (Duran-Martinez, 2014). This prescriptive approach is avoided here because safety tool boxes are not always pertinent to the uniqueness that is each researcher’s fieldwork experience. This entry focuses on the idea of learning in the field to stay safe and being responsive to challenges and dilemmas. Literature to date suggests that personal safety depends significantly on one’s capacity to develop an understanding of what is, and is not, dangerous when conducting research. The aim here is to reach beyond anecdotal run-throughs of risky tales from the field, by providing insights into how researchers can develop their own ‘ethnographic safety’ (Baird, 2018).

It is important to take into account that no ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach will ever be truly adequate, as different methodologies and methods require tailored approaches. Broadly

speaking, this entry will be of most use to those carrying out qualitative work in the social sciences that requires fieldwork that draws substantially on interpersonal connections (although danger and quantitative research has been discussed by Osorio, 2014).

Furthermore, the notion of ‘ethnographic safety’ does not mean that non-ethnographers will not find it useful—it is a concept to be used as a ‘thinking tool’ around safety for anyone entering a dangerous field. This entry draws upon a body of literature that is mostly based on reflective individual experiences of dealing with danger. What this reveals is that learning about safety requires learning from others’ experiences. In that vein, this entry draws upon a number of the author’s (Adam Baird’s) lived experiences as an ethnographer of gang violence in Colombia, Trinidad, and Belize.

The entry is structured as follows: First, an overview of the key literature on dangerous fieldwork is provided. Second, carrying out research in dangerous contexts is unpacked by looking at the ‘golden rule’, gatekeepers, ethnographic safety, interviewing potentially violent subjects, and interpreting interview data. Third, dilemmas in the field are discussed by considering how cautious researchers should be, when they should expect trouble, the moral economy of violent communities, the ethical tightrope, and honesty and reflection.

Literature on Dangerous Fieldwork

Scholarship that focuses specifically on dangerous fieldwork is a relatively new endeavour. In the 1980s there was widespread apathy within the social sciences to the multifarious threats in the field from physical assault, rape, and murder even though researchers had worked in insecure contexts for years. Researcher safety was often dependent on well-meant advice from supervisors, if it was discussed at all. It was not until 1990 when Nancy Howell’s *Surviving Fieldwork* report was published that field safety garnered attention as a stand-alone issue. The same year, Jeffrey Sluka’s article based on his experiences in Belfast

pioneered a set of recommendations for the intrepid researcher. These publications were followed by substantial collections of researcher experiences (Lee, 1995; Nordstrom & Robben, 1995) and articles based on personal experience of sexual and gender-based violence (Moreno, 1995). The 2000s pushed on with a number of edited volumes, most recently by Desmond Arias in 2014, supported by numerous individual articles (e.g., Baird, 2018; Clark, 2012; Holmes, 2013; Pearce & Loubere, 2017; Rodgers, 2007), including work on sexual harassment and gender-based violence (Hanson & Richards, 2017; Mahmood, 2008; Ross, 2014). Regarding this latter point, there is still much work to be done on the gendered dynamics of dangerous fieldwork despite some recent exceptions (except for recent exceptions, e.g., Baird, 2018; Durán-Martínez, 2014; Felab-Brown, 2014). It is clear that since 1990, literature focusing on dangerous fieldwork has become an increasingly robust body of work from which new generations of researchers can draw.

Carrying Out Research in Dangerous Contexts

The Golden Rule

When entering perilous research environments, *local knowledge* is the basic safety tool, particularly for postgraduate students, PhD candidates, and early career researchers who often work alone. If anything comes close to a ‘golden rule’ it is this: know your context. Researchers can prepare their entry into dangerous and unfamiliar contexts by conducting background desk-based research, and then spending time interviewing local experts, academics, and government officials to gain a foundational knowledge of the context before beginning dangerous fieldwork. This period is also very useful for scoping potential locally based partners who can act as gatekeepers (see the following section).

By absorbing local cultural and linguistic norms all researchers, regardless of discipline, can become ethnographers of violence (Goldstein, 2014). Many researchers will be clear ‘outsiders’, which influences how they approach safety. In my own experience of

entering poor gang-saturated neighbourhoods, visually I have been a clear outsider—a White, fair-haired, tall, foreigner—but also more subtly because of the way I carry myself and my patterns of speech, behaviour, and dress. Whilst researchers may enter dangerous neighbourhoods with trusted gatekeepers, in general, trying to blend in and being less conspicuous reduces one’s chances of victimisation. Of course, this depends upon the researcher and field site, but profile lowering has been useful for mitigating risk for a number of scholars (Baird, 2018; Felab-Brown, 2014).

Gatekeepers

Gatekeepers ought to be knowledgeable and trusted local organizations or individuals. Their importance for safety cannot be understated. With the correct accompaniment, researchers can navigate through even the most challenging terrains, from prisons to conflict zones, the caveat being that these settings will always present elevated risk no matter the precautions taken. Yet good gatekeepers not only act as a way to enter and navigate the field, they are often the primary contacts and first local friends that accompany researchers through the lifespan of their fieldwork. Therefore, they are important in helping researchers develop the local knowledge that will keep them from harm. Collaborating closely with local partners, for example, through participant observation, turns them into a type of safety buffer. My gatekeepers were mainly civil society organisations working with gangs and vulnerable youth, and could all rightly be considered grassroots experts in danger mitigation.

Ethnographic Safety

Whilst never entirely predictable, violence can become less unpredictable. For example, in gang-affected communities there are well-known ‘hot spots’ where young men in gangs engage in shoot-outs, particularly on weekend evenings. Nonetheless, violence is also emotive, impulsive, and sporadic. When researchers first enter dangerous contexts, they should rightly feel on edge as violence seems unpredictable, but with experience even non-

ethnographers can develop a feel for the ‘rules of the game’, a normative understanding of when and where violence is more likely. This feeling, or intuition, underpins ‘ethnographic safety’ (Baird, 2018), an acquired sociocultural understanding of danger in the field that reduces the chances of the researcher, or research subjects, being victimised. This notion is that locally rooted cultural know-how can be used to develop the danger mitigation skills that are second nature to many locals.

Ethnographic safety differs epistemologically from tick-box risk assessment procedures because it requires a layer of normative awareness acquired over time in the field. This does not mean that risk assessments should be discarded wholesale, rather, these should be considered as a first step in developing more sophisticated means of safety. In my experience, although ‘ethnographic safety’ varies from place to place, it is a type of ‘street smarts’ that is transferrable to similar violent settings across countries. Although, those who may not have this experience should find solace in the fact that even the most experienced researchers were once inexperienced, facing a lonely struggle to understand the field around them. This experience still comes with a caveat: local violence may start to seem less anomic, but there is no perfect predictor of violence, and in dangerous fields the chances of the researcher being in the wrong place at the wrong time remain elevated, no matter how polished one’s nous becomes.

Interviewing Violent Subjects

Researchers should be cautious when first contacting violent subjects. For example, I have previously made a bridge to gang members via trusted gatekeepers who acted as a safety guarantor in these instances. In Belize City, a civil servant was engaged in an unofficial gang negotiation process, so I interviewed gang members who were in her office; I accompanied a respected local Imam into a Belize prison for his outreach work and interviewed convicted gang members in a room next to his class; in Medellin, I spent hours walking around local

neighbourhoods with a gatekeeper from a local organisation and when we ran into gang members he would introduce me to them as he was well respected locally. In all of these cases, dangerous subjects were contacted through someone they already trusted, which allowed the interviews to take place.

It is important for researcher to be careful how they present themselves so they do not appear to be threatening. This depends on the construction of how one's own identity, race, gender, class, or age defines interactions with others. For instance, I deliberately used my gender to engage male gang members through masculine patter or banter, talking about football, beer, women, and so on, in the search for a common ground with individuals very different from myself in all but gender. This had benefits and drawbacks. On the downside, this seemingly innocent banter set the tone for lopsided interviews, as gang members would easily slip into a type of male braggadocio, readily talking up the glories of street battles, partying, drinking, drug taking, and the sexual conquest of women, but they rarely talked about pain, loss, or the trauma in their intensely violent lives. On the upside, using banter to break the ice was very effective and almost every gang member I approached was willing to talk to me and even have the conversations recorded. That said, conducting research with potentially violent subjects can also be very time consuming. In Medellin, I averaged just one successful gang member interview per fortnight as they were not always easy to locate, and I had to go to them. There are no guarantees, so when contacting these types of subjects, researchers should expect an amount of data collection anxiety, and plan in additional fieldwork time where possible.

Interpreting Interview Data

Researchers are also likely to find interpreting interviews with violent subjects challenging. Although the gang members I spoke to were often surprisingly frank about their life experiences, particularly about how they felt victimised by the undoubtedly tough

circumstances of their upbringing or violence from other gangs, they frequently used ambiguous or disingenuous language about their own acts of violence, either because they felt shame, wanted to present themselves as the ‘good guys’, or because they simply didn’t trust me with the truth.

Moreover, the language used in chronically violent communities develops distinct discursive characteristics over time. In Medellin’s ganglands, a thickly jargonised slang called *parlache* is commonly used with scores of words for killing, drugs, and weapons, so understanding this language was essential for interpreting gang member narratives. For example, a seemingly light-hearted quip about putting the ‘wooden pyjamas’ on someone actually signified a coffin, and hence murder. Absorbing linguistic norms fosters the interpersonal relationships that are at the heart of effective qualitative research and analysis, particularly ethnography. Using *parlache* was also useful for ice-breaking and to appear unthreatening, but particularly as a way to subtly demonstrate to gang members that I knew what I was talking about, which improved the candid nature of our exchanges. Confessional data around acts of violence rarely emerges easily, so researchers should be patient and expect to be frustrated frequently. I found that the best interviews come about through the generation of rapport, good humour, and gentle cross-examination. It normally took interviewees some time relax, so more confessional information tended to surface in the latter parts of the conversations.

Dilemmas in the Field

How Cautious Should Researchers Be?

Moral dilemmas should be expected during dangerous fieldwork and opinions around caution vary. Some say researchers of violence should exercise ‘extreme caution’ (Goldstein, 2014, p. 1), others that some risk-taking is inevitable, especially if the fieldwork involves

studying the absence of security (Ross, 2009). Researchers will often be faced with a delicate balance between risk-taking and obtaining the data they yearn. A number of times I have decided that spaces were too dangerous to enter, such as meeting gang members at night when they drank and took drugs, which was when most shoot-outs occurred. However, some methodological approaches use 'edgework', where the researcher deliberately puts himself or herself in the risk position of the research subjects, but this should be very carefully considered beforehand; a well-justified example of edgework is Seth Holmes (2013) accompanying migrants crossing the Mexico-United States border. Cautious behaviour can generate feelings of researcher frustration, that the pot of (data) gold is just a small risk away, but there are times when researchers have to make an ethical judgement call and call off the fieldwork.

Expect Trouble, Try to React

'Operational' approaches to security such as the exit strategies used by humanitarian practitioners in conflict settings (Mertus, 2009) are not necessarily appropriate for (lone) researchers in the field. At some stage personal safety will depend upon reactions, improvisation, and quick thinking to negotiate unexpected dangers. I once had to 'dance' out of a tight spot when a gang leader said to me, 'I could fucking kill you right now and no one would ever catch me', by back-peddling rapidly as I explained why I was not a police informant (Baird, 2018). Researchers might think through how they would react in these types of circumstances, but when they are actually faced with a dangerous situations their behaviour may be different. When something goes wrong, reactions can vary. I witnessed a murder in Trinidad and was calm enough to take a testimony from the dying man, which was later used in prosecution. I was similarly controlled when calling the police after I walked in on an attempted murder/suicide in Belize, but I panicked blindly with the crowd when caught in a terrorist bomb attack in Pakistan. What is notable about these cases is that none of them

occurred in the specific areas I was conducting fieldwork, but rather at the hotels, guest houses, or places I went during ‘down time’. When working in destinations where violence rates are high, researchers should be mindful that violence is often elevated countrywide and not necessarily contained within an artifice ‘field’ of data collection.

The Moral Economy in Violent Communities

In violent communities, neat dichotomies between victim and perpetrator do not exist. Working in dangerous fields obliges researchers to negotiate a complex and often confounding moral economy, what Kimberly Theidon calls the ‘gray zone’, with competing discourses that sanction or reject violence. Researchers may be dismayed by some individuals whilst others become their friends, but they find that most inhabitants seem to fit simultaneously into both categories (Theidon, 2014). In my own research, it was obvious that many gang members loved their mothers and children, and they were often kind and charming. Still, many also murdered on the streets and raped young women. Whilst researchers might expect armed actors to justify violence, they do not necessarily expect it from other community members. I was taken aback when some of my male gatekeepers in Belize City and Medellin showed deeply homophobic or misogynist views. In one instance, a friend turned a blind eye to a murder because the victim ‘was a son of a bitch’ and a wife-beater (Baird, 2018).

The moral economy of community violence can affect researchers, because violence itself becomes banal as locals simply have to get on with their lives. Whilst coming to grips with this normativity is an immersive and enriching part of the methodological process, it often comes at the cost of personal anxiety about how one should behave morally and ethically, and the sheer experience of quotidian violence comes to weigh upon one’s mental health (for a broader discussion on mental health see Theidon, 2014).

The Ethical Tightrope: How Close Should Researchers Get to Violent Actors?

Effective data collection with armed, potentially violent, or criminal actors requires engaging with them and building an interpersonal connection to access quality data. Numerous scholars have argued that social violence (e.g., that seen in Latin American cities) is generated by systematic and historical exclusion. Researchers are, therefore, justified in feeling a tension between empathy for the way some violent individuals have been victims of circumstance, and a rejection of the violence they wreak on their own communities. For that reason, researchers should be a little precautionary in any pursuit to understand, empathise, or develop rapport with such subjects so that they do not abandon their critical faculties when listening to them (Clark, 2012). Whilst gangs can be understood as a symptom of broader political failure, they should not be exempt from critical examination, and researchers should be careful not to romanticise them as a grandiose emancipatory project.

Honesty and Reflection

Researchers, like anyone, are prone to mistakes and misjudgement. They should be cognisant of moral trade-offs in pursuit of field data and academic ‘success’. In particular, they need to make decisions in the field so that their presence does not legitimise local discourses of violence. These are judgement calls, and no one is immune to error. With one particularly notorious gang member in Medellin, I later regretted that I had humoured him to the point of friendship, which was ethically questionable. He would greet me in the community with a hug, offer me drink and drugs, and ask if I wanted to go out and party. This was a young man who had murdered numerous people, who terrified and extorted the local community, but who had the hard-to-find ‘interview gold’ I was seeking. This poses serious ethical dilemmas, raising questions about rapport building and befriending violent subjects (whether intentionally or not) that may legitimise local discourses of violence.

When a key gatekeeper shocked me with homophobic comments and whispered that he beat his wife ‘when she deserved it’, I avoided confronting him, and when a murder occurred in the community and my gatekeepers who witnessed it did not inform the police, I felt privileged that the secret had been shared with me, and did not press them to tell the police. Upon reflection, this was a way of preserving the gatekeeper relationships central to the success of my fieldwork. Admittedly, these actions were complicit in some way in sanctioning discourses of violence. However, researchers also have to conform to exist within extremely violent contexts. These are some examples of painful dilemmas in the field to which no answer feels completely satisfying.

Final Remarks

There is a growing body of scholarship dedicated to dangerous fieldwork, ethics approval is now the norm for PhD fieldwork and to secure research funding, and there has been a substantial increase in postgraduate training to address field risks.

There are multiple caveats associated with dangerous fieldwork, which is why it is scarce. It is simply not for everyone, but it can be extremely rewarding. Researchers should consider ‘how-to’ safety guides a first step to conducting research in challenging settings. Whether researchers are ethnographers or not, it is important to consider developing ‘ethnographic safety’, the capacity to read, predict, and respond to the textures of insecurity in the field.

For qualitative methodologies, close interpersonal relationships are central to the quality of the research process. Building these relationships in dangerous contexts involves walking a moral tightrope, but it is the researcher’s responsibility to attempt to behave ethically, no matter how tempting the data that lie just out of reach. There are no easy answers to many dilemmas researchers face in the field, but reflecting, sharing, and discussing their experiences honestly is an important step.

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