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CONDUCTING SAFE FIELDWORK ON VIOLENCE AND PEACE

SARAH ZUKERMAN DALY

► FIELDWORK LOCATION: COLOMBIA

“A LO MEJOR NO PASA NADA”

ME: Is it safe to travel to Murindó en el Chocó?

FRIEND: A lo mejor no pasa nada.

This phrase is the response I received every time I sought to determine the safety of a place to which I hoped to travel within Colombia. It translates as “hopefully” or “maybe nothing will happen.” It put the onus on me, the recipient of this advice, to determine what “a lo mejor” meant. Did it mean “hopefully” there was only a 10 percent chance that something would happen, or “maybe” a 50 percent chance? It required assessing the risk tolerance of the person providing the advice. In a country in which violence stretches as far back as anyone can remember, violence at times seems to loom in the future as well, and violence has touched nearly everybody and everywhere, the phrase “a lo mejor” comes to mean something different. And then I had to assess, what is my own risk tolerance? Will I travel somewhere if it is a 50 percent chance, but not a 60 percent chance, that something might go wrong? What would change that calculation?

I began researching Colombia in 2003 with a project on the onset and dynamics of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) insurgency. While in the field, paramilitary organizations that fought against the FARC began to sign peace agreements, disarm, demobilize, and follow

puzzlingly divergent postwar trajectories. Some of the organizations dissolved. Others remained strongly cohesive. Some maintained governance roles and authority over civilian life, and others played anemic roles in their communities. Some silenced their guns, and others returned to organized violence. Explaining this variation brought me back to the field for several years to conduct surveys and interviews of ex-combatants, their families, psychologists, recipient communities, and victims for my dissertation and first book. I have continued to conduct fieldwork in conflict areas across the world to study the outcomes and dynamics of postwar elections for my second book on why citizens vote for political actors who used violence against the civilian population. One of the key aspects and challenges of my fieldwork is navigating safety concerns, which is the focus of this chapter.

QUIÉN MANDA POR ACÁ

It is difficult to know when you are safe because the correct answer to the question *Quién manda por acá* (Who is in charge?) may be illusive. Here are a few examples.

I enter the ominous, cement cinder block building, hollow on the inside, daunting on the exterior. I progress through the security checks, and they stamp my forearm with an invisible stamp, only decipherable under ultraviolet light that indicates “I am just visiting . . . I may be released.” I wonder what would happen if it rubs off, or if, in the heat of the midday sun, I sweat it off. As I wonder, I emerge into the bright light of the patios on the inside of Bellavista prison. I am in the patios of the former Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), the paramilitaries. FARC has their own patios. Different gangs have their own patios.

After interviewing paramilitaries for several hours, I have to go to the bathroom. I am a woman in an all-men’s prison. I ask the person in charge. He met me at the prison entrance. He has accompanied me around the prison. He arranged the interview room. He helped keep everything orderly during my meetings. He is a prison guard. He says, “of course,” and proceeds to lead me down a long, dark corridor. Through the musky gloom I make out men’s cells on either side. At the end of the corridor is a closet-sized bathroom. I am trapped. My companion points out his cell. I realize that he is not a prison guard, but a prisoner. He is *de facto* in

charge; roles appear reversed here. My heart begins to race, and my inner thoughts ping-pong between “everything will be OK, everything will be OK” and “you are an idiot, you are an idiot.” I did emerge unscathed, but I did not know who was really in charge inside the prison.

ROLE REVERSAL

On another day inside the prison, I interviewed a paramilitary commander who had been responsible for extorting all buses and taxis for the entire metropolitan area of Medellín, Colombia’s second largest city—a massive operation. He was guilty of countless crimes and was sentenced to a combined forty-five years in prison. He had not shaved in what looked like months and had barely bathed in as long. He exuded a stench. During our conversation, he seemed distracted and kept staring at my hands. I moved them out of sight, below the desk. His eyes continued to look down. Finally, he blurted out, “I cannot believe that you did not get a manicure.” I was taken aback. We were discussing the extortion racket, victimization, and coercive governance, and he was concerned about my cuticles! Over the course of our interview, he continued to return to his utter disbelief at the disrepair of my nails, which seemed ironic given his present physical condition and the gravity of his crimes. Weeks later, I found myself in a nail salon, getting a manicure. I thought to myself, “quién manda por acá?” Role reversal.

On other occasions, I incorrectly assessed who was in charge. It was at these moments that I felt less secure. I visited a “high-security” prison in Tier-ralta, at which many of the masterminds of the paramilitary phenomenon in Colombia were gathered. I assumed that the commanders would be in cells. Instead, only a low hedge separated these human rights abusers from liberty. The commanders explained to me that they were there of their own volition and therefore did not need cells or barbed wire. When I interviewed several of the top FARC commanders, including Pastor Alape, Marco Calarcá, Carlos Antonio Lozada, Sandra Ramírez, and Rodrigo Granda, there were guards outside their doors, but it was unclear if the guards were protecting them or me. I had to recalibrate my understanding of *quién manda*.

I frequented a restaurant in Apartado that had my favorite juices: feijoa and uchuva. A magnetic woman usually held court at a table next to mine. She alternated between hushed whispers, barked orders, and boisterous

merrymaking. I later learned that she was the sister of Carlos Mauricio García Fernández, alias “Doble Cero,” an infamous paramilitary commander in Urabá and Córdoba. Quién manda por acá?

Figuring out who is in charge and who you can trust is essential for ensuring your safety during fieldwork, but it requires that you allow roles to be reversed, and assumptions and priors to be popped. Risk assessments during fieldwork are complicated by a number of other factors as well.

THE STORY BEHIND THE NUMBERS

For the past fifteen years, I have tracked violent events in Colombia, beginning with those in 1964 and continuing to the present. This added a numeric probability to violence in different places at different times. On one hand, it made me aware that almost nowhere was “safe,” and on the other hand, it demonstrated that the likelihood of anything happening in X location at exactly X moment in time was very low.

The benefit of being in the field is that there is a story behind every number, and you can learn that story. The numbers sometimes can abstract from the story, but other times they fail the reality. For me, the qualitative and quantitative diverged one evening in Aguachica, a small city in northeast Colombia. In thick, saturated air, I sat at a desk opposite a FARC guerrilla in the courtyard of a school, abandoned since classes had let out several hours earlier. I began the section of a survey I was enumerating on why he had joined an armed group. He answered that the most important factor in his decision to join the FARC was “wanting money, land, and food.” I asked him to tell me the story of how he joined. He descended into a narrative of how the paramilitaries had come into his town and had killed his family. That was when he decided to join the FARC guerrillas. Fieldwork provides the opportunity to marry the numbers with real stories. In this case, it helped me understand the multiplicity of motives underlying recruitment and the challenges of using blunt survey questions to reveal these complex motives.

QUOTIDIAN LIFE DURING WAR

Adding to the complexity of deciding whether a place is safe for fieldwork is the false sense of security and the quotidian nature of life during war.

Even in the most active combat areas in a war, violence does not happen every day, or even every week, nor everywhere. Violence is episodic. When I traveled to Tibú in the Colombian region of Catatumbo, near the Venezuelan border, people told me it was “very caliente” (meaning combustive and dangerous). But that did not mean that I saw anything violent or experienced anything of the sort. In fact, quite the opposite, because daily life usually goes on, no matter how dangerous a place is. People drank *tinto*, sat about chatting, walked this way and that, worked, laughed, and shouted. The fact that life looks very normal during war makes it highly challenging to assess danger because you usually cannot see it.

Compounding this is the false sense of security that extended time in the field creates. It is psychologically exhausting to live in fear, and for this reason we have coping mechanisms. We create a sense of security in an unsafe environment, and our risk tolerance increases because we crave and need a semblance of normalcy. Understanding these factors, which render assessments of security blurry in conflict zones, is also important to keeping oneself safe in such environments.

Situations morph constantly and quickly on the ground in conflicts: one day a place might be deemed safe, and the next, dangerous. Before traveling to “complicated” parts of Colombia, I sought input from people I knew high up in the military intelligence services and would seek their advice the night before I traveled. I mapped the local violence patterns down to the neighborhood level, knowing that one *vereda* might lie above my risk threshold and the adjacent one below it.

If you are studying political science because you care about the real world, then you will enjoy, and even love, fieldwork. Allow yourself to “muck around,” to have the field complicate and revise your view of the issues and processes, and to have the realities and voices on the ground marinate before imposing theoretical order on them. But for fieldwork to be productive and enjoyable, you must prioritize your safety. Find trusted people who can help you assess security risks in the moments before you travel, learn the stories behind the numbers, be wary of the quotidian life during war and a false sense of security, and always seek to know *quién manda*.

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PUBLICATIONS TO WHICH THIS FIELDWORK CONTRIBUTED:

- Daly, Sarah Zukerman. *Organized Violence After Civil War: The Geography of Recruitment in Latin America*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016.
- ——. “Voting for Victors: Why Violent Actors Win Postwar Elections,” *World Politics* 71, no. 4 (October 2019): 747–805. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887119000091>.
- ——. “The Dark Side of Power-Sharing: Middle Managers and Civil War Recurrence,” *Comparative Politics* 46, no. 3 (April 2014): 333–53.

3. Are there people from whom I would want to conceal my association with this particular agency?

If the answer is yes to 1 and no to 2 and 3, you're probably good to go. But if your answer is hesitant or ambivalent about any of them, or you're worried that your associations might put your research informants at risk in the field, **talk to a number of scholars in the field**—including those who have never accepted funding from such sources—**to help you come to an informed decision about whether and how to proceed.**

FOTINI CHRISTIA

Chapter 8: Navigating Data Collection in War Zones

The most robust lesson I have learned from my fieldwork is that **the field holds a lot of richness and opportunity just waiting to be discovered.** While doing largely observational dissertation-related research on civil war alliances in Afghanistan and Bosnia, I noticed some excellent conditions for field experiments on local governance and development lurking in the background. I was aggressive in pursuing these opportunities in both settings, resulting in some exciting projects and journal articles. Focus first and foremost on the fieldwork for the specific inquiry at hand, but keep your eyes and ears open for other research opportunities, as well as for potential collaborations on the ground. Closely following local developments and talking to policy experts and journalists while in the field can help highlight such opportunities for original research design and innovative measurement strategies that are bound to pay high research dividends.

SARAH ZUKERMAN DALY

Chapter 39: Conducting Safe Fieldwork on Violence and Peace

Fieldwork, at times, may present an ethical and personal challenge: **being a chameleon.** I interviewed people who had done bad things and people with whom I strongly disagreed. I found that I had to maintain a chameleon personality and show empathy for all viewpoints. I had to somehow show empathy not only for the victim who had lost his or her entire family in a brutal massacre but also for the commander who had orchestrated the massacre. I had to listen with an open mind to people from the whole

range of the political spectrum. Everything in the field comes through personal connections. If people believed I was neutral, they would share their stories, information, connections, and access with me. To gain an unvarnished story and to remain safe required that I withhold judgment. However, being a chameleon can be trying on a personal and ethical level. When it is, **make sure to give yourself time and space to process your interactions, and maintain trusted friends with whom you can be a more immutable version of you.**

KEITH DARDEN

Chapter 18: My Stint as a Ukrainian Taxi Driver

Always remember that in the field, **the subjects of your research are not your friends—they are the gatekeepers to the information you need.** To get them to open up, you need to find a set of keys specific to that context. You may have to strategically take on a slightly different persona, or create a slightly different personal history of yourself, or stress some things from your true past and suppress others. Much is out of your hands or restricted by institutional review board standards. **You have the most control over the image of yourself that you present and the settings in which you present it.** If you are creative and strategic in your selection of both your persona and the settings, you are more likely to secure the information you are seeking.

CHRISTINA M. GREER

Chapter 5: Conducting 1,500 Surveys in New York City (With Great Uncertainty and a Limited Budget)

When conducting interviews, **arrive early and expect to stay later than anticipated.** For almost every interview I have ever conducted, I was told that my subject had thirty minutes maximum to dedicate to me and my project. You may only receive thirty minutes from your interview subjects, but in the event that they want to give you more time, do not overbook yourself. If the conversation is going well and they understand the necessity of your research, a thirty-minute conversation can extend into an invitation to join them at a meeting or an event as they conclude with you. **Allow flexibility in your schedule** so you can accept new opportunities that may arise.