SAGE researchmethods cases

Ethnographic Fieldwork: Conducting Close-Proximity Research on Mexican Organized Crime

Abstract

In this case study, I address the possibilities and constraints surrounding research considered high risk. Drawing on my own experience of conducting ethnographic fieldwork on Mexican organized crime, I depart from the notion that such fields are most pertinently approached via qualitative methods, as they remain largely understudied. I then discuss how, even though generally taken to be near impossible, such research can be feasible under certain circumstances. It is essential to balance an inherent tension between controlling risks and allowing for a necessary degree of methodological flexibility. I conclude by highlighting that only case-specific and situationally adapted methodological solutions can be crowned by success.

Learning Outcomes

This contribution should enable the reader to learn that

- There are severe limitations with regard to the application of qualitative methods in high-risk fields of research
- Research on organized crime (and similar matters), nevertheless, does not have to be discarded categorically
- There is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all methodological recipe for conducting such research
- Each approach to such a field requires a case-specific research design that reflects the characteristics of the field and the individual characteristics of the researcher
- Research needs to be designed in a way to reconcile the inherent tension between risk minimization and the methodological flexibility needed to successfully extract data

The Right Method: An Obvious and Definite Choice?

Researchers will inevitably be faced with a number of essential choices, starting with the question of what is (worth) to be researched. Once a subject is chosen, the appropriate means for cultivating the right kind of data to answer the research question(s) will have to be defined. Research method books frequently portray this methodological choice as one that, once made, requires simple and almost mechanical execution. Translating a research proposal from paper to 'the real world' is, however, rarely as straightforward. The research process never falls short in providing surprises, and what awaits researchers 'out there' can neither be completely anticipated nor be squeezed into one-size-fits-all methodological blueprints. This appears especially relevant for qualitative research whose success fundamentally depends on researchers' capacity to engage in the ongoing and reflexive refinement of methods and goals

in response to arising opportunities and contingencies. The need for flexibility is furthermore accentuated when it comes to extracting data from fields considered high risk and thus remaining largely underexplored, reducing the predictability of concrete fieldwork conditions to a minimum. In the following, I draw on my own attempt of gaining access to the field of Mexican organized crime to argue that—in spite of a strong and common notion to the contrary— qualitative research into organized crime represents a needed as well as feasible methodological pathway. I stress that the elastic implementation of my research strategy ultimately enabled me to gather rich data for a PhD project on the way an illicit organization known as *Los Caballeros Templarios* (LCT; 'The Knights Templar') pursues a project of alternative governance in the Western Mexican region of *Tierra Caliente*. For being able to carry out ethnographically based sojourns, the support of a gatekeeper and the reflexive construction of my own role as a researcher are highlighted as paramount factors. In synthesis, I portray close-up research on organized crime an undertaking not be discarded categorically yet one to be approached with the outmost care as the existence of a number of not entirely controllable risks will always impose more severe constraints on such research than on 'normal' qualitative fieldwork.

Methodological Constraints on 'High-Risk Research'

The Tension between the Right Methods—And the Feasible Ones

For certain subjects, methods that appear theoretically apt might seem unpragmatic. Research on organized crime highlights this tension between conceptual as well as methodological purity and the practical realities of social scientific enquiry in especially clear terms. For, the need to explore a fundamentally under-illuminated field's structures and further basic characteristics—a task most pertinently approached qualitatively—is thwarted by the perception that methods requiring the researcher's proximity to the studied subject are too risky to be employed. In this vein, my own attempt of getting close to Mexican organized crime was initially overshadowed by this apparent dilemma. Identifying a significant gap in the existing literature—the behavior of Mexican criminal organizations toward 'the local' was treated, at best, as a collateral aspect of an otherwise purely market-oriented behavior—was exciting. Addressing this lacuna through empirical work, however, translated into a major methodological challenge. Confronted with a fundamental scarcity of secondary data on the matter, a qualitative orientation seemed to be the only way to realize an exploratory entry as laid out above. Moreover, such an approach would allow participants to frame their experiences in their own terms. The latter appeared especially relevant to me, as the ones most immediately confronted with organized crime— civilian populations—are rarely 'given voice', nor have they been sufficiently recognized as a formidable source of information on this phenomenon.

I ultimately ended up collecting data by means of ethnographic fieldwork in LCT's core operational territory. For diverse reasons discussed in more depth below, I had initially responded to the constantly reproduced notion of overly severe methodological constraints by designing a more cautious approach to data collection. Yet, it was by allowing for a fundamental degree of flexibility—one key advantage of qualitative approaches—that enabled me to capitalize on opportunities as they arose over the course of my fieldwork. As a consequence, I was able to gather other and considerably richer data than would have been possible by narrowly sticking to my initial research design. In turn, the extraction of such data allowed me to more critically reflect upon misperceptions about organized crime, which tend to be sustained by the scarce data available to outsiders.

The Seeming Impossibility of Getting Close to (Mexican) Organized Crime

My initial, more conservative research design was based on two main factors. First—and representing a problem familiar to criminologists—many methods applicable for 'normal' research were deemed to be too dangerous to represent feasible options. This appeared especially relevant with regard to ethnographic fieldwork which, while allowing for the rich description of a given social context because of the researcher's emersion into and interaction with the latter, also entails an array of risks such as getting physically injured (e.g. by 'criminals' objecting to some outsider sniffing around) or getting into conflict with 'the law' as authorities might want to extract privileged information about criminal activities from the researcher. Getting close to the subject I meant to study thus seemed to represent a veritable 'mission impossible', as Patricia Rawlinson critically synthesized the generalized (albeit not unchallenged) perception that it simply goes against the very nature of organized criminals to disclose information and that so much is at stake for them that they would be willing to violently defend their clandestine existence.

This notion of impossibility appeared especially true with regard to Mexican organized crime, associated with a high degree of violence. Prior to my departure, members of my home university worrisomely asked whether it would in fact be necessary to leave my host university's campus in Mexico City. Once in the country, reactions to my plan to gain access to *Tierra Caliente* ('Hot Land')—a region bearing the stigma of a barbarian, lawless black hole that had, unsurprisingly, given birth to one of Mexico's most notorious criminal organizations, LCT—reached from amusement and bewilderment to the questioning of my sanity. Such assertions were predominantly based on the perception that if already highly unlikely for a Mexican, it would be ridiculous to assume that an utter outsider perfectly fulfilling the stereotype of a *gringo* (or Caucasian North American) could even contemplate doing so.

Institutional Pressures: Signaling Control over the Research Process

Second, the push for a conservative approach stemmed from having to legitimize my undertaking to a number of institutional bodies. So as to secure funding (via a scholarship), mitigate the worries of my supervisory board, and obtain approval by my university's ethics committee, a high of degree of control over the research process had to be signaled by laying out strategies to mitigate potential risks. Especially due to the rising importance of ethics committees in Anglo-Saxon academia, this presents (qualitatively oriented) researchers with major obstacles. For, the expectation of utter control stands in harsh contrast with the possibility to explore the unknown as well as the necessity to remain open toward the unexpected, an essential success factor for ethnographic fieldwork.

Factoring in Anticipated Risks and Limitations: A Conservative, Yet Flexible Research Design

Circling around the 'Hot Stuff'

To reconcile both demands, I chose a cautious approach to data collection that would allow me to get close enough yet to remain sufficiently distant. I was planning to conduct semi-structured interviews with actors who were not directly involved in any sort of illegal activities but could still provide informed accounts about the way LCT exercised territorial control. I thus meant to circle around the 'hot stuff' by focusing on members of groups as diverse as local journalists, business men, and members of nongovernmental organizations that would enter the region yet could be met in safer locations. After a few months of proceeding in this way, I had already gathered a rich set of data. The fact that I had furthermore obtained copies of extensive judicial documents added to the feeling that I had built a sufficient basis for successfully completing my PhD. That is, judging from the opportunities that had presented themselves without physically entering LCT's core operational territory, I was approaching what is called data saturation.

Remaining Patient and Attentive—In Spite of Frustrated Attempts of Getting Closer

Nevertheless—and inspired by (rare) examples for successful close-proximity research into high-risk matters set by researchers such as Dick Hobbs, Michael Kenney, and Damian Zaitch —I had never completely abandoned the idea of stepping foot into *Tierra Caliente*. In fact, during the first few months of my stay in Mexico, some promising contacts had arisen. However, all of these ultimately stopped short of getting me where I wanted to go. In some instances, I could not trust these contacts, their motivations, and their capacity to protect me. In other instances, it seemed that this lack of trust worked the other way around with contacts apparently deeming it too risky to expose themselves by being associated with an outsider such

as myself.

However, the constant doubting of the feasibility of my project also had a liberating effect. No such thing as ultimate access was expected of me—nobody expected me to risk my life for data —and anything a PhD student would get out of this would be considered a success already. As a consequence, this equipped me with the necessary tranquility for carefully evaluating potential risks and benefits of arising leads, and I felt comfortable with turning down offers as this did not question the overall prospects of my project. This furthermore allowed me to remain patient as I kept on 'snowballing' my way through diverse social networks, my eyes open toward new opportunities.

The Fruits of Flexibility and Persistence: Access to the 'Hot Land'

'Allowing fieldwork to do you'

Ultimately, it took me more than half a year to find a trustworthy contact who signaled interest in my study, welcomed its objectives, and was happy to support me by 'introducing [me] to the side of Tierra Caliente [I] won't see in the media'. Had I categorically excluded a physical entry into the region by rigidly sticking to my initial research design, this opportunity would not have presented itself. Most importantly, without having maintained an open mind toward this scenario, I would not have realized what potential lies in accepting that 'you don't do fieldwork, but fieldwork does you', as Bob Simpson phrased it. Ultimately, it was only by interacting with locals in their 'natural setting'—the sociocultural space of *Tierra Caliente*—that I was able to revise an array of preconceptions that had hitherto limited my project in methodological and conceptual terms.

Preconceptions Turned Upside Down through Everyday Interactions

When the opportunity opened up, I was—due to the expectations formed on the basis of the outsider knowledge available to me—envisioning a brief stay. During the latter, I meant to expose myself as little as possible and to conduct semi-structured interviews with informants in a punctual manner so as to minimize risks. I was thus pursuing something akin to a surgical, 'get-in-grab-data-get-out' strategy. Within days of being in the field, these preconceptions would, however, go rapidly up in smoke. Decisively, engaging in conversations and everyday interactions with locals led to a fundamental expansion of the objectives of my research and, simultaneously, of the methods of data collection that began to appear feasible.

Redefining My Role in the Field: My Outsider Status as Central Asset

Overall, the most important learning effect consisted in the realization that I was being

perceived by locals in fundamentally different fashion than I had anticipated. Allowing, in turn, for the reflective revision of my role as a researcher ultimately proved to be the decisive tool for gaining deeper access and better data. Indeed, most of the factors that had seemed to render this mission unfeasible would turn out to be advantageous. Rather than, for instance, being rejected as a nosy foreigner with harmful intentions and posing a risk for whomever might share information with me, my presence was surprisingly welcomed.

To be sure, I did enter the field equipped with a decent level of cultural knowledge and (very Mexican) Spanish, obtained over previous stays in the country. Else, a sufficient level of participation and immersion would have been out of the question. Nevertheless—and somewhat contrary to the notion that only 'natives' or those 'having gone native', to take up a popular ethnographic theme, are granted comparable access—my biggest asset was to be perceived as *a certain kind of outsider*.

Entering and Staying in the Field—Enabling Factors

The fact that this was so and that I was, as consequence, able to construct my role in a way conducive to my research goals was rooted in two main factors. First, I supposed a rare appearance for inhabitants of a region that sees little to no presence of foreigners. In fact, during the entire period spent in *Tierra Caliente*, I did cross paths with another foreigner. Hiding myself from locals' views, as I had initially planned to do, was therefore neither feasible, nor was it desirable. For, playing out the card of being an outsider genuinely interested in taking a look behind the façade constructed of much lamented cultural stereotypes and one-sided government accounts positioned me as a more objective observer and thus into a welcomed opportunity for locals to share their side of the story with the outside world.

It was highly advantageous, as I learned, to stress this interest but also the fact that I was (1) German, that is, neither Mexican nor US American and thus not susceptible of having a stake in the 'war on drugs', one of whose scenarios is Tierra Caliente; (2) an academic, hence somebody striving toward greater objectivity than the little beloved (domestic) media and not openly taking sides; and (3) a student keen on learning, a fact that provided me with a certain assumption of inconspicuousness.

No Access without a Gatekeeper

The second factor without which access to the region and the opportunity to construct and communicate this positively connoted role would have been impossible to achieve consisted of the fact that I enjoyed the support of a gatekeeper. Widely stressed in the ethnographic literature, access to certain populations can be blocked without the mediation of gatekeepers.

That is, outsiders might not be equipped with a sufficient degree of initial trust to even attempt to do so independently. In such cases, being introduced by a local that ideally possesses a sufficient degree of respect within a given community so as to be able to vouch for the researcher's integrity and honesty can be paramount.

For the success of my own research, the importance of my gatekeeper could not have been greater. He would provide with an array of initial contacts, introduce me to basic behavioral rules, and furthermore support me in assessing risks and the trustworthiness of potential informants. Most crucially, however, my gatekeeper vouched—and was able to do so due to his standing in local society—for the genuineness of what I claimed (rightfully) to be the reasons for my presence.

Ongoing Methodological Adaptations: Allowing for a Gradual Shift toward Greater Informality

As a result, I was able to not merely rely on sporadic interviews to gather data but to do so by participating in everyday activities as well as in social events as diverse as baptism parties and traditional cockfights. While the latter were highly interesting, for instance, as I could observe the ritualized display of the local hierarchy, situations of everyday banality, such as simply sharing coffee, proved to be one of the richest sources of information. Already due to the fact that I was becoming less strange of an occurrence, I started to encounter a greater willingness to share information. This process was correspondingly reflected in a gradual shift toward a greater degree of informality in data collection. In this vein, I started to more heavily rely on participant observation, a key feature of ethnographic fieldwork.

While I did not abandon interviews as a means of data collection—in total, 50 interviews were carried out—these were becoming less standardized and increasingly embedded in informal social interactions. Greater informality provided an atmosphere conducive to fostering trust and was furthermore more pertinent in a cultural environment itself characterized by a great deal of informality. Conversations would go on for hours about subjects as banal as football and cars—both tuned out to be ideal small talk points in light of locals' expectations of what a German should be interested in—to then sometimes taking an abrupt turn. Conversational partners would, for instance, suddenly seem to remember that they, too, used to traffic 'merchandise to the north [the USA]' and went to jail for it.

Moreover, it was frequently sufficient to simply be around in order to make interesting observations such as the constant parade of luxury vehicles, a prime manifestation of narcotrafficking's material empowerment. Even if I was trying to take a night off—something utterly impossible when in the field, as it turned out—data seemed to miraculously find their

way to me. Having a drink in a local bar, to cite one instance, members of LCT rushed in to hand out CDs containing the 'Hymn of LCT', a propaganda song the disk jockey (DJ) was quick to play on the sound system.

Negotiating My Presence in the Field with the De Facto Authority

Negotiating access to the field—that is, agreeing implicitly or explicitly on the rules and circumstances under which researchers are granted access to certain populations—with local civilians was one thing. Here, signaling that I did not buy into the stigma imposed on the region by the outside world and that I came foremost to listen appeared largely sufficient. Yet, so as to sustain a prolonged presence, I was furthermore reliant upon a minimum degree of tolerance by the powers-that-be. For, as part of its operational logic, LCT jealously takes notice of any sort of unusual occurrence within what it considers its rightful territory.

First Contact and Obtaining 'Guest Status'

Having spent 3 days in the region, the first opportunity to conduct an interview with one of LCT's low-ranking members arose. Representing an exciting opportunity as such—quite literally so—I hereby also learned that the group's leadership had taken notice of my presence. Having chatted for about half an hour—a good part of which is consumed by him asking me questions and not vice versa—he receives a text message and announces he has to leave. During the following meeting, the same day, he informs me that he reported back to his superiors, apparently obtaining authorization to continue our conversation.

A few weeks after this first contact, my gatekeeper—who, again, vouches for me and is able to do so as this is a region where mouth-to-mouth propaganda is highly efficient—and I are invited to a meeting with LCT's second-in-command, taking place in a remote location to which we are driven by a small convoy manned with six of the group's enforcers. During an hour-long conversation, I obtained valuable data, allowing me to triangulate this high-ranking member's account of local affairs with that of civilian populations and state agencies, and I moreover learned what it means to be a 'narco by heart', as he emphatically refers to himself. Yet, once again, this meeting appeared to primarily serve the purpose of evaluating my intentions. The location of the meeting in front of a cemetery furthermore conveyed the message that 'foul play' from my part—that is, if I turned out to be an *oreja* (ear) for the government after all, an initial suspicion voiced by LCT—would entail consequences. The fruits of having apparently passed this test consisted of being promised further talks that would, in fact, take place over the coming weeks. I was moreover told that I would not have to worry about my security as I was now in 'their territory' and that as a guest, they would do me no harm.

Why 'They' Would Talk to Me

The fact that I was given 'guest (investigator) status' appears to be, at first sight, counterintuitive to the taken-for-granted unbreakable clandestine nature of organized criminal groups. However, LCT is different insofar as it portrays itself as a benevolent force of order existing to protect locals from greater evils such as nonlocal groups and federal agencies, detested by a significant part of the population. To convey this message, it seeks a certain amount of public exposure and I, in my role as an objective observer, might have appeared to represent an opportunity to support this strategy. Tellingly, during a later meeting, I am offered greater access by the leader, including LCT's paramilitary training grounds. He adds, however, that one thing will be asked of me in exchange: 'If you like what you see, you publish, if you don't like it, you don't publish'.

The Limits of Access: Balancing the Tension between Risk and Deeper Access

In retrospect, I believe that my response to his proposal—I stated that I would have to remain neutral and could not categorically exclude any material from publication—supposed a breaking point. He signaled comprehension by saying that 'of course I had my own mind', and no pressure was exerted to enter such an agreement. However, additional access might have been possible, yet only by renouncing to an array of fundamental professional and ethical standards, converting myself into a tacit propagandist. The other alternative appeared equally unacceptable. For, lying and still publishing would have put my gatekeeper's, further informants', as well as my own physical integrity in danger.

The choice I had to make was most illustrative of the fact that even though I did succeed in gaining relatively profound access to the region and the phenomenon of Mexican organized crime, I was not free to move and do as I pleased. Nor did it imply that the risks associated with such research simply disappeared and/or could be ignored. As a consequence and general rule, this leaves researchers pursuing comparable projects with the essential challenge of being most attentive to potential sources of risk and of factoring these into their behavior as consciously as possible.

Identifying and Dealing with Sources of Risk

One basic problem with defining the right kind of behavior in the field so as to mitigate potential risks lies in the limited time horizon available for making decisions. In my case, windows of opportunity to engage with potential informants would vanish as rapidly as they arose. This was especially the case when engaging with members of LCT who, conscious of the risk implied in such encounters for themselves, would not offer to meet twice. Equipped with only patchy

information and the possible degree of control thus severely limited, snap decisions had thus to be taken on the basis of 'what felt right'. This led me to turn down specific offers such as visiting a methamphetamine laboratory which appeared highly interesting but not secure enough when weighted up against the data to be gained.

While in the field, I felt that the greatest source of risk was not the organized criminal group itself I was investigating. Indeed, the latter risk I felt largely in a position to control through my own behavior—at least to the best of my knowledge. For, while my presence had been approved by LCT's leadership, I could not be certain that this fact had effectively been communicated throughout all the organization's layers and that this decision was welcomed by all members.

A further (and more immediate physical) risk stemmed from being caught in cross fire during a possible confrontation between LCT and one of its enemy groups, including federal agencies present in the region. The fact that the latter did not seem that remote of a possibility was underlined by a surprise helicopter attack carried out by federal police on precisely the same locality where I had conducted an interview with the group's leader barely 2 weeks before.

Finally—and this was the source of risk most preoccupying me—I could not exclude the possibility of attracting the attention of the authorities and of facing legal consequences. After all, this would not have been the first time that researchers (and journalists) have been put under pressure by state agencies to disclose privileged information or even incarcerated for refusing to do so. Personally, I was taking propaganda material emitted by LCT, considered illegal, out of the region and thus through military checkpoints. In addition, I was in the possession of knowledge that could possibly unveil the whereabouts of individuals labeled enemies of the Mexican (and the US American) state.

Moreover, leaving the field did not entail the dissolution of all risks. While researchers such as myself are able to return to a safe location some place far away, the ones ultimately rendering such research possible in the first place—gatekeeper(s) and informants—remain exposed to risk and so do their families. The only consequence of this can be to protect informants by anonymizing data so as to protect informants' identities in the best way possible. In my case, however, some individuals—above all my gatekeepers—maintained a visible proximity to me during my stay and could therefore nevertheless become victimized in some way. The question of where to publish, which data (not) to include, and which language to choose to make sense of local realities thus becomes a delicate balancing, almost political, act.

Generally speaking—and as alluded to above—the problem is not only how to deal with

recognized sources of risk but also how to treat the possibility that there might be some risks impossible to identify and factor in altogether. Some uncontrollable component of risk must, if such research is undertaken, necessarily remain.

Conclusion

To sum up, I agree with Bruce Jacob's position that dangerous fieldwork should not be discarded altogether. Without it, phenomena such as the one my research project is dedicated to will remain seriously underexposed. As I have shown, in order to get sufficiently close and something worthwhile out of it in terms of data, it is essential to allow for fundamental flexibility —personally, methodologically, and with regard to the objectives pursued. Had I chosen an overly rigid research design—necessarily based on nothing but the scarce information available to outsiders—my research would have been seriously stymied and a significantly poorer pool of data would have been the consequence. However, and in spite of the fact that no such thing as utter control over the ethnographic research process is achievable or even desirable, all possible efforts should be undertaken to minimize risks for everybody involved. A necessary tension between control and the necessary flexibility will, in synthesis, always remain. In this vein, close-proximity, ethnographically based research into organized crime (and similar 'high-risk' matters) neither represents an absolute impossibility, nor can there possibly be such a thing as a one-size-fits-all model for ethnographic success. Every scenario offers its own possibilities, constraints, risks, contingencies, and opportunities. Ultimately, it is up to the individual researcher (assuming that she or he is given the necessary institutional freedom) to use his own good judgment to decide whether it is feasible (and sane) to go ahead with a given research project and to choose the right situational approach.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

The author claims that the only feasible way of approaching the case studied consisted of a qualitative methodological orientation. Do you agree? What would your research design have looked like?

Why can the term 'research design' be misleading?

What factors constrain the use of qualitative methods for criminological research and research on organized crime?

Should high-risk research such as the one conducted by the author be allowed by universities?

Which sources of risk are identified in the text? Which further sources of risk do you see, and how would you deal with them if you were to conduct such research?

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