



Critical review

Anxiety, epistemology, and policy research “behind enemy lines”

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ABSTRACT

Based on my political opposition to neoliberal policies, I elected to conduct dissertation research on a World Bank-funded land policy in Guatemala. This paper explores emotional aspects of this work. Specifically, I describe my fear that research subjects would accuse me of being a spy. I then describe my efforts to cope with these fears and the ways that fear and coping influenced my meaning-making work.

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1. Introduction

During my doctoral field work I studied the practices of policy-makers as they implemented a World Bank-funded land policy in Guatemala. As an interested foreign researcher, I was welcomed within the policy-making circles, and I became a quasi-insider in a world of technocrats, economists, planners, and surveyors. However, during the research process I often felt unnerved. As a “lefty” academic, I was uncomfortable engaging on a daily basis with the authors of this neoliberal policy. This discomfort manifested in the form of anxiety. Specifically, I feared that I would be called out as a spy by the people whose research practices I was studying. To reduce my anxieties, I engaged a range of coping mechanisms and techniques. This paper describes my fears, the coping mechanisms I used, and how these efforts helped constitute the knowledge I produced through my dissertation.

This paper contributes to the growing literature on how researchers' emotions influence the process of knowledge production (Jaggard, 1989; Laurier and Parr, 2000; Widdowfield, 2000; Bondi, 2005a; Holland, 2007; Bennett, 2009). This study differs from others that focus on fear and meaning-making in that my emphasis is not on the debilitating, even paralyzing effects of fear with respect to the research process (Widdowfield, 2000; Laurier and Parr, 2000; Wilkins, 1993; England, 1994; Bondi, 2005b). While fear can have this effect, this essay emphasizes how fear—and my efforts to cope—led me in new research directions and to new possibilities. But this paper not only describes my efforts to cope with (manage) emotion (Hochschild, 1998; Hubbard et al., 2001). It also describes how new meaning-making possibilities

emerged through unexpected encounters with research subjects with their own emotional lives. Finally, my approach to the study of fear is inspired by recent scholarship that characterizes fear as a multi-layered range of inter-related feelings rather than a narrowly defined emotional response or clinically-determined symptom (Saville, 2008; Pain, 2009).

This study also contributes to an interdisciplinary literature focused on the relationship between social science and spying. This literature includes surveys of scholarly participation in the gathering of military intelligence (Fluehr-Lobban, 2003; Price, 2004; Barnes and Farish, 2006), as well as studies by researchers who reflect on occasions when they were suspected of being spies (Herbert, 2001; Owens, 2003; Simmons, 2007; Sallaz, 2008). My investigation represents a modest new direction: I seek to address the meaning-making work set in motion when researchers fear they will be accused of spying by their research subjects. This is, I contend, a relevant issue given that many scholars express concerns about it.¹

2. Situating fear

As Tolia-Kelly points out, the possibility of experiencing a particular emotion is contingent upon specific and uneven geometries of power (2006). What were the conditions for the anxiety that I felt while conducting research with policy-makers? My first task was to make my way into the Guatemalan agrarian bureaucracy; I was welcomed in part because of my status as a white-skinned,

¹ Searching Google Scholar with the terms “ethnography” and “spy” yields a long list of papers in which authors briefly describe their concerns that they are viewed as spies by research subjects (search October 11, 2009).

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North American of heteronormative comportment. This subject position facilitated access because of imperial histories that connect the United States and Guatemala. During the 20th century in particular, white men from the United States have influenced Guatemalan politics through their roles in intermingled processes of development aid, military intervention, international business, and research (Sundberg, 2003; Grandin, 2004). Furthermore, the privileges of whites in Guatemalan society date back centuries to the colonial history of Central America when light-skinned descendants of Spaniards began exercising control over nearly all aspects of governmental administration (Casaus, 1992). This history is one factor that allowed me to position myself with relative ease in the Guatemalan agrarian bureaucracy.

A second factor that enabled me to find a place in this bureaucracy—and, as well, feel the anxiety that I did—relates to my personal history. After graduating from college in the mid-1990s, I was employed for 2 years as an environmental “expert” for a Washington-DC-based non-government organization operating in northern Guatemala. This job helped me develop personal and professional networks in the areas where I would conduct dissertation research almost a decade later. When I started my field work, I found old networks and friends throughout the institutions I planned to study. While I had my reservations about the policy, my place in these networks led me to feel included in the community of policy-makers. Thus, my particular work experience also created conditions that helped me situate myself within the agrarian bureaucracy. That said, my “personal” history was helpful only within the larger context of the colonial and imperial histories described above.

As the title of this essay suggests, I began my research intending to go “behind enemy lines,” and I did this in relation to my political opposition to neoliberalism. It is important to specify that I use “behind enemy lines” metaphorically, not literally since some scholars do quite literally *participate in contemporary military operations*.² While designing my research proposal, I saw Guatemala’s new, World Bank-funded land policy as deeply problematic. After writing a Master’s thesis on a similar policy in Guatemala (Gould, 2006) and reading about the World Bank’s work in other parts of the world (Escobar, 1995; Jansen and Roquas, 1998; Mitchell, 2002), I became convinced the policy I would study represented a threat to marginalized populations in Guatemala. I planned research on the policy hoping that the information I would produce would support the struggle for a more equitable distribution of land and resources in Guatemala.

3. Anxious (inter)actions

When I arrived in Guatemala I found that policy-makers implementing the land policy were working for an array of decentralized institutions including state land agencies, the World Bank, national and international engineering firms, and even the Catholic Church. In my first encounters with policy-makers, I presented my research interests and asked if I could conduct participant observation research within the policy process. As I explained my research, I often felt like the proverbial spy. I worried that these policy-makers would detect my politics—my opposition to neoliberal policies—and eject me from the institutions I wanted to study. This fear affected my behavior during these encounters. My anxiety was somewhat distracting: listening closely became more difficult than I anticipated as did expressing myself clearly in Spanish. Some-

times I would stammer a bit before regaining my composure. I also felt excitement. I fantasized that I was an undercover agent finally reaching the source of information I had long coveted. In the swirl of emotion, I could feel myself perspire, becoming somewhat redolent!

I did not like these early meetings, and yearned for more comfortable encounters with research subjects. To reduce my anxiety during fieldwork, I adopted a series of coping strategies. These strategies affected the interactions I had with policy-makers and my research. First, I sought to eliminate formal meetings. Instead, I tried to integrate myself into the social life of the policy process so that I could meet policy-makers under conditions that would cause me less anxiety. Since I was invited to social events by my contacts in the agrarian organizations, I accomplished this relatively easily. Rapidly, I began to meet my former “interviewees” in informal settings such as bars, restaurants and soccer fields. A few months after arriving in Petén, I rented a house with an ex-patriot engineer who worked for the project. Our house became one of the hubs of activity for project managers and technicians. Although I did not always feel comfortable even in my own (shared) house, I was now able to learn about land policy, institutional conflicts, and the struggles and triumphs of technicians while sitting around the kitchen table or in our rather comfortable living room.

My goal in integrating myself into the project was to reduce the anxieties that were emerging during formal encounters (interviews) with project leaders. These leaders were overwhelmingly male and their non-familial social lives were largely carried out among other men. As a result, my participant observation research extended along networks composed primarily of men; I learned most about aspects of land policy dominated by men. Specifically, I became familiar with the policy-making process in the countryside, at the upper levels of the agrarian organizations, and in what might be called cartographic workshops, places where land survey data were converted to maps. In time though, my connections in this masculine policy-world led me to aspects of the project carried out by women. Nevertheless, by the end of my stay in Guatemala, I was least familiar with those parts of the policy process implemented by women including legal research into the histories of state-sanctioned land claims, aspects of urban land policy, and clerical and accounting processes administered mostly by women. In sum, my efforts to reduce my anxieties about being detected as a spy led to dissertation research that focused on men’s worlds within the land policy process.

Participation in the social life of the policy work, however, did not entirely relieve my anxiety about being seen as a spy. In my new social circles I felt, for obvious reasons, uncomfortable discussing my politics. I sought to cope with this anxiety by finding safe spaces where I could be myself. I found these in peasant organizations as well as state- and church institutions led by leftists. After visiting these organizations I felt recharged, able to sustain myself more comfortably in my day-to-day work. Nevertheless, as a person who had lived in Petén for a few years before this dissertation effort, I was aware that my strategy was problematic. I knew that agrarian institutions in Guatemala and elsewhere cannot be neatly divided into “enemy” and “allied” camps. I also knew that intricate personal and professional networks connect agrarian institutions resulting in substantial mobility of employees among institutions. As well, through my graduate studies, I had become convinced of the importance of avoiding static and binary visions of politics, (e.g. Nelson, 1999). Yet during my research, I could not let go entirely of this binary political/moral geography of enemies and allies. I clung to this notion in part because it provided spaces where I could rest and “be myself.”

The boundaries that I established among institutions in my efforts to find safe spaces extended themselves to my research and

² Anthropologists and other social scientists are employed by the Human Terrain System and other counter-insurgency programs funded by the United States Foreign Military Studies Office. See the website of the Network of Concerned Anthropologists for more information: <http://concerned.anthropologists.googlepages.com/home> (Accessed on May 17, 2009). See also Mychalejko and Ryan (2009).

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