

Article

When Overt Research Feels Covert

Researching Women and Gangs in a Context of Silence and Fear

Ellen Van Damme

KU Leuven

Abstract This paper discusses the tension between ethics in theory and ethics in practice, along the continuum of overt and covert field research. I argue that complete overt research is not only unfeasible, but can even be dangerous or harmful to the people we research and the researcher. Within this discussion it can be stated that the formal standardized requirements of the ethics committees actually undermine our ability to act ethically. For this reason, I argue that there is a need to focus on a virtues based approach and reflective stance regarding ethics in the field. I use the case of Honduras, where I conducted field research on the role of women and gangs, to discuss this argument. High levels of insecurity in Honduras create a context of fear which prescribes certain rules of engagement with the wider political economy of violence, and specifically on community interactions with gangs (Hume 2009a; Wilding 2012). My research shows that there is a silent agreement among the people living in neighborhoods with gang presence not to engage in gang-related discussions. Local organizations also prescribe a strict code of conduct in the field, which prohibits the use of crime, violence and other related concepts. This raises key practical and ethical questions for researchers, not least – how do we research that which is silenced? The aim of the paper is to critically discuss the relation between university ethics processes – ethics ‘in theory’ – and street ethics or ethics ‘in practice’, when conducting (participatory) observation in urban neighborhoods and prisons in Honduras.

Keywords overt/covert research, women and gangs, semi-ethnography, Honduras

On our way down to the prison, I told Pablo [my gatekeeper] about my concerns regarding the fact that I am conducting research in urban communities detention centers where active gang members are present. I knew that gang members in prisons communicate with those in the communities, and I wondered what they would say about me as ‘that foreign researcher’. Pablo tried to appease me by saying their level of communication does not reach that far. Once we arrived to the female prison and set foot to the gang module, he presented me together with his other colleagues as a group of psychologists that would come to work with them every week. He did not give me the floor to present myself, nor did the women seem to be really interested in me, but I was genuinely worried about the ethical issue of my presence there. On our way back, I asked Pablo whether he knew I was not a psychologist, but a criminologist. ‘Of course’, he told me, ‘but we don’t have to tell them everything either, do we? The fact that you come with us already explains enough’. I could not help but wonder, is this morally acceptable and ethically reconcilable?
(fieldnotes 2018)



DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5617/jea.6696>

Journal of Extreme Anthropology, 2019, 3(1): 121-134, 2535-3241

121



Despite the growth of ethics committees in academia trying to control what we study and how we study it, researchers are still, and maybe even more, confronted with (ethical) dilemmas in the field. An ethics committee examines research proposals that describe in detail how a study should be overt, including informed consent and other formalities which seek to protect our research subjects. However, once all the boxes are ticked off, one is released into the field without much follow-up. We are said to conduct good field research from the onset, the way it was approved by an ethics committee. Since current ethics committees in social sciences are still focusing on trying to control the study as much as possible, without providing a follow-up space for the researchers, the question remains: How should we deal with ethical dilemmas when conducting fieldwork in highly violent and dangerous settings? I take my semi-ethnographic field research on women and gangs in Honduras as a case to argue that the obsessed striving for overt research, which is defined as most 'ethical' in theory, has proven to be inherently unpredictable at best, and counterproductive and even dangerous at worst.

I have conducted research on the role of women in and around gangs in Honduras, Central America. Together with El Salvador and Guatemala, Honduras forms the infamous Northern Triangle which is riddled by gangs (also referred to as *maras* or *pandillas*), the biggest being the *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13) and Eighteenth Street gang or *Barrio 18* (Cruz 2010). Although I was relatively aware of the difficulty of reaching out to women who want to talk about their experiences with gangs, it seemed that the (female) community was even more silenced than I could have imagined (cf. Hume 2009b). Therefore, in order to thoroughly understand the context and gain the trust of the people I was interested in, I conducted a multi-sited semi-ethnography in urban marginalized communities and detention centers. After a three-month exploratory field study in 2017 in Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala, I did a six-month in-depth field study in 2018 in Honduras and a four-month follow-up study in 2019. During these thirteen months of fieldwork, I conducted observations in community centers, schools, detention centers, etc., as well as several semi-structured interviews. Within this patriarchal society, an often-heard Honduran saying states that: 'women belong at home and men to the street'. As such, male gang members are more visible than female members on the street, in prison and in the media. Consequently, most gang research in the region has almost exclusively focused on men and thereby neglected the many roles women fulfil in relation to the gangs. This effectively silences women's experiences of urban or 'new violence' (Wilding 2010), which consequently 'limits our understanding of patterns of violence and how it is reproduced' (Wilding 2010, 720).

Even though academic ethics' guidelines prescribe to be overt about one's research, the overtness of my study was at times impeded by the nature of the research context and the culture of silence in the country. There is a silent agreement among the people living in neighborhoods with gang presence to not talk overtly about the gangs in public spaces, and especially not to pronounce the words *maras* or *pandillas*, nor many other gang-related terms. Also, the organizations that provided access to the *barrios* and prisons maintained a strict code of conduct in the field, which prohibited the use of certain gang-related concepts. Even more so, and as is common in most (ethnographic) field research, I found myself in a constant roller-coaster of opportunities and disappointments due to the fragile political situation, restrictions in access to the field,

schools and prisons closed down to prevent the spread of viruses or because of political strikes, and most of all: the context of silence and fear. The static approval of my ethics committee did not provide any support to the dynamic setting of the field. To the contrary, I was constantly weighing off academic ethics to street ethics and wondered: how could I ever negotiate my way into this world of silence in an ethical way?

Ethics in Theory: How Overt is Overt?

The ethics committee within academia originates from the bio-medical sciences. For this reason, the emphasis lies on securing confidentiality and informed consent from the research 'subjects'. Given the social sciences only later started to take over this idea of an ethics committee to evaluate research projects, it seems that they are not always adapted to the social setting as opposed to a bio-medical setting (Macfarlane 2010; Winlow & Hall 2012). Moreover, the focus lies on complying with standardized ethics forms, instead of a continuing process of reflexivity. In discussing the theoretical aspects of what it means to conduct ethical research, according to the current post-modern ethics committees, the question at stake is whether conducting ethical overt field research is always so 'ethical'? With the increasing and contested control of the ethics committees, or what Winlow and Hall refer to as the controlling 'Little Others' (Winlow & Hall 2012, 409), one might wonder whether we have lost the original principle of 'do no harm', in exchange for complying with ethics committee protocols. The latter being a way of ticking boxes, as opposed to the need for a constant process of moral reflection (Macfarlane 2010).

As discussed by Winlow and Hall (2012), due to the postmodern scepticism and cynicism, we gave up our faith in 'the authority of the Big Other'⁴⁴ (Winlow & Hall 2012, 409), or one overall ruling Leviathan. In this era of alleged freedom, which led to a quest for guidance within the maze of unresolved open-ended dilemmas and discussions, the Big Other was eventually replaced by several 'Little Others' (Winlow & Hall 2012, 409). The ethics committee forms an example of these Little Others. Or else, 'once [this Little Other] produces its guidelines, the postmodern subjects it hopes to guide respond with obligatory scepticism' (Winlow & Hall 2012, 410). Indeed, researchers have questioned the power and legitimacy of these ethics committees (Clapp, Gleason and Joffe 2017), stressing the need to focus on the local context of each individual research proposal, instead of implementing standardized procedures (Jaspers, Houtepen & Hortsman 2013).

One of these standardized procedures, which is implemented by the ethics committee to guarantee the overtness of the study, is informed consent. The British Society of Criminology (BSC) defined informed consent as 'a responsibility on the part of the researchers to explain as fully as possible, and in terms meaningful to participants, what the research is about, who is undertaking and financing it, why it is being undertaken, and how any research findings are to be disseminated' (BSC 2006, 3). In addition to that, it seeks to emphasize the voluntary characteristic of participation in research.

⁴⁴ 'The Big Other is a psychosocial construct without a material reality. Its creation reflects our desperate attempt to flee the terrifying private world of the Real in order to occupy a more comfortable Symbolic world beyond— a world with shared meanings, rules, traditions and social institutions that allow us to coexist in relative stability and conviviality' (Winlow & Hall 2012, 409).

Nevertheless, there is a lot of discretion left to the researcher in explaining the research ‘as fully as possible’. Moreover, according to the American Society of Criminology (ASC), informed consent only needs to be obtained ‘when the risks of research are greater than the risks of everyday life’ (ASC 2015, 3). The latter seems to put more emphasis on the ‘do no harm’ principle, whereby the focus lies on minimizing harm and maximizing the protection of both the researcher and researched (Israel & Hay 2006). But one might wonder how to assess this principle in an already high-risk environment.

To discuss the tension between ethics in theory (also referred to as ‘procedural ethics’ (Guillemin & Gillam 2004, 261) and ethics in practice, I focus on (participatory) observation within ethnographic field research. Ethnography, as it was practiced by its pioneers, Boas and Malinowski (Helm 2001), consisted of spending several years of (participatory) observations in indigenous communities. As such, ‘[e]thnography, emerging from anthropology, and adopted by sociologists, is a qualitative methodology that lends itself to the study of the beliefs, social interactions, and behaviors of small societies’ (Naidoo 2012, 1). Without going into an extensive discussion about the concept of ethnography, I agree with Ingold (2014) that the term has become almost a trademark to sell one’s goods – or in this regard research (proposals) – for which reason it has lost much of its value and integrity. Subsequently, since I did not live in the same neighborhoods as my research participants, and focused on several neighborhoods and detention centers to conduct (participant) observations and interviews, I prefer to label my research as semi-ethnographic multi-sited research. At the core of ethnography lies participant observation, whereby the researcher seeks to be accepted as a person in the field he or she wants to study. In echoing Angrosino, ‘participant observation is not itself a “method” of research – it is the behavioral context out of which an ethnographer uses defined techniques to collect data’ (Angrosino 2007, 17). In my case, these methods or techniques were observations⁴⁵, interviews⁴⁶, of which mainly semi-structured⁴⁷ interviews, and focus groups⁴⁸.

I entered the field in 2017, and conducted a total of 13 months of field research over the past three years. A first exploratory field research in the region (El Salvador, Guatemala,

⁴⁵ ‘Observation is the act of perceiving the activities and interrelationships of people in the field setting through the five senses of the researcher’ (Angrosino 2007, 37).

⁴⁶ ‘Interviewing is a process of directing a conversation so as to collect information’ (Angrosino 2007, 42).

⁴⁷ ‘Semi-structured interviews are non-standardized, and are often used in qualitative analysis. The interviewer has a list of issues and questions to be covered, but may not deal with all of them in each interview. The order of questions may also change depending on what direction the interview takes. Indeed, additional questions may be asked, including some which were not anticipated at the start of the interview, as new issues arise. Responses will be documented by note taking or possibly by recording the interview’ (Gray 2018, 381).

⁴⁸ ‘A focus group is essentially an organized discussion among a selected group of individuals with the aim of eliciting information about their views. The purpose is to gain a range of perspectives about subjects and situations. [...] the purpose is to generate interactions and discussions within the group’ (Gray 2018, 460).

Honduras and Nicaragua), together with the fact that I already had prior experience in the region, was vital to identify key actors in the field. Compared to my previous research on gangs in Central America, in 2013 (Van Damme 2017), four years later the amount of organizations and researchers working on the topic of gangs had shrunk visibly. The same organizations I interviewed back then had shifted their focus towards other topics – mostly because it had become too dangerous to work with gangs. It became clear that access to the field would not be easy and I wondered whether I had chosen the right topic to focus on. At the same time, the necessity of research on women and gangs was confirmed by all experts interviewed, as well as the difficulty to access this group. As one of the experts told me: ‘within this whole universe of difficulties, the theme that you have chosen, I don’t want to discourage you, but it’s one of the most difficult ones’ (personal communication, Honduras, 7 June 2018). Considering that already studying men related to gangs is difficult, this difficulty of focusing on women is magnified as they are even less prone to talk. Being introduced by the right informants and gatekeepers, as well as possessing some vital skills in relation to the language and culture, was key to gaining access to the field.

Beyond the fact that gatekeepers facilitate access to the field, they are also mediators for the amount of overtness a researcher can exercise in particular (unfamiliar) settings, in order not to cause any harm. For my fieldwork on women in and around gangs, I collaborated with two types of gatekeepers. The first type belonged to a governmental institution and facilitated access to prisons. The second type belonged to a non-governmental institution and facilitated access to the communities. Both gatekeepers had many years of experience working with gang members in prisons, and/or in poor and dangerous communities. Notwithstanding that they had gained trust of the people they worked with, this trust had to be renegotiated every time a new gang leader was appointed in prison or the community. With new gang leaders came new rules and precautionary measures. One of the most difficult measures for me to adapt to was the discourse of what I would call ‘agreed upon silences’. Even though both organizations work on the topic of gangs, they would never voice it this way. Rather, they frame their work within a broader scope of ‘prevention’ or ‘creating a culture of peace’. Sensitive words, such as gangs, crime, violence, etc., were avoided at all times in order not to jeopardize their work. At the same time, I noticed through the conversations during their work in prison and the communities that it was clear that their mission was to prevent gang membership, reintegrate former gang members and assist victims of gang crime and violence, among other issues. Being rather new to the field, I felt at first the need to tell everyone in the communities or prisons about my research project, so that I could comply with my ethics permission. However, from the ways in which the gatekeepers introduced me to the field, it became clear to whom I could say what and how. Moreover, it started to dawn on me that people in the community or prison were often very well aware of my work, but did not want me to explain it in all detail with the exact words – ‘the walls can listen and speak’ (fieldnotes 2018). The level of overtness was thus mediated, evaluated and adapted on a constant basis throughout the fieldwork.

In sum, in this era of ethics committees evaluating the ethics and overtness of research, covert research is easily labelled as unethical (Spicker 2011). However, researchers often encounter dilemmas in the field which they did not or could not foresee beforehand. Given these serendipities, the general principle of ‘do no harm’ is both proclaimed and

challenged (Hugman, Pittaway and Bartolomei 2011; Hernández et al. 2013; Vanclay, Baines and Taylor 2013), researchers might have the feeling their research method is ‘unorthodox’ (Biondi 2016) due to the many ambiguities surrounding research ethics. This exposes clear tensions between ethics in theory and ethics in practice. Being completely overt at all times and towards everyone in the field might not only seem to be unfeasible, but can even be dangerous to the people we research and the researcher.

Ethics in Practice: Covert Practices in Overt Research

In the end, one should recognize that covert practices are inherently present in overt research. Subsequently, instead of perceiving overt and covert research as two binaries between which a researcher needs to choose (or even evade), we should analyze overt and covert positions on a continuum (McKenzie 2009). Our quest for a balance on this continuum should then be guided by a genuine reflexive stance, as opposed to complying with static formalities (cf. the ethics committee). A reflexive stance means that ethical research should be driven by a sense of personal virtue (Macfarlane 2010), rather than ticking boxes of standardized ethics forms. As such, ‘real research ethics consist of facing moral challenges in the field’ (Macfarlane 2010, 22). For this reason, Macfarlane proposes ‘[a] virtue-based approach to ethics [which] focuses on *being* rather than *doing*. In other words, virtue theory is concerned with defining what we mean by a “good” person rather than trying to predetermine how someone should act through identifying principles that pay no regard to culture, context or the personality of the actor’ (Macfarlane 2010, 22). Macfarlane highlights five virtues: courage, respectfulness, resoluteness, sincerity and humility. Key within the virtue approach is to be mindful of the fact that conducting research is not about being talented or not, it is about learning and improving one’s skills (virtues) along the way. Hence, it is ‘a way of connecting “research ethics” with one’s own lived experience as a researcher’ (Macfarlane 2010, 25).

This virtue-based approach of Macfarlane (2010) is also in line with the reflective stance as discussed by Wolcott (2005). In discussing dilemmas researchers encounter when conducting (ethnographic) field research, or what Wolcott defines as ‘the darker arts’ (Wolcott 2005, 115), Wolcott argues for a genuine reflection at all stages of the fieldwork. In regard of the discussion on how overt one can truly be, he argues that this is not only unrealistic, but can even lead to severe repercussions. In line with a virtue-approach and the principle of ‘do no harm’, we should ask ourselves who we serve when being completely overt: the people we research in the field, the researcher’s moral, or the ethics committee’s request for informed consent? Indeed, ‘[d]emands for full disclosure of our research purposes among those whom we study rankle us, yet we express surprise and dismay to discover that something we have observed too closely or disclosed too fully rankles them’ (Wolcott 2005, 144). Again, a virtue-approach and reflective stance can be the guideline, more than a standardized ethics form. I illustrate this in the next sections on how I applied this in a field of silence and fear.

Once I had established the necessary contacts with gatekeepers, and negotiated my way into the field, I was able to start with my ‘actual’ field research. I was really eager and overly excited to move from interviewing experts to conducting observations in ‘the field’. However, I greatly underestimated the stress, emotional exhaustion and frustration triggered by the silent discourse within which I had to seek answers to my research question: what *is* the role of women in and around gangs? Notwithstanding the common knowledge about the gangs and the shared suffering of violence and crime, once in the

field it was all about '*ver, oír y callar*' ('see, listen and keep quiet'). How could I manage this discourse of silence in an ethical way? Inherently connected to this is the question: what is ethical in this context? Is it complying with the ethics' committee request for informed consent forms, or rather listening to the silent voices?

Before going into the *barrios*, the NGO gave me a lecture on risk assessment and management. I was told what (not) to wear and which vocabulary (not) to use: neutral clothes and no discussions on politics, football, religion, violence, crime, gangs or any words referring to the former. In the frame of this risk assessment, the issue of '*ver, oír y callar*' was also brought forward, although at that point in time I had no idea of the magnitude of the impact it would have on my research.

The community leaders who lead and manage the development of the communities have become victims of assassination (they and their families). Some inhabitants have been forced to leave their own homes, leaving them adrift, impunity is maintained, without the clarification of deaths or criminal acts, by the fear that prevails and the saying 'see, listen and keep quiet', a situation that frightens and limits the participation in development actions. (NGO risk assessment protocol)

Moving into the field, I noticed the presence of what I would call 'agreed-upon silences', or what is often referred to as '*secreto a voces*' ('open secret') (El Heraldo 2016). Everybody knows the gangs, their affiliates, their structure, their modus operandi, their hideouts, and even their crimes, but nobody would ever admit to have seen or heard something, out of fear for retaliation from the gang and a lack of trust in police.

Another issue, which is intertwined with and highly influences this principle of '*secreto a voces*', is the aspect of *machismo* or 'the belief in male hegemony over women and other men, played out with physical forces, control, and violence' (Bird et al. 2007, 121). *Machismo* is entrenched within the patriarchal society in the Northern Triangle of Central America. Moreover, an 'important obstacle to addressing violence against women is the high level of institutionalized patriarchy that serves to reinforce male impunity' (Hume 2009b, 80).

Within interpersonal relationships and the domestic sphere, or what I would call the 'private space', the Honduran saying proclaims that 'men belong to the street and women to the household' ('*el hombre es de la calle y la mujer de la casa*'). In a country with matriarchal households and patriarchal public spaces, this saying is particularly pertinent. In line with men being public figures while women are assigned to the household, male gang members are more often public figures (making newspaper headlines, taking the floor on gang discussions and being the point of focus in gang research), while women in the gangs are less visible (occupied with the household and caregiving tasks within the gang, and portrayed as victims of gang violence). However, once we dare to step beyond this visible barrier and question these conservative role patterns, we notice that women have a much more active role to play in the gang and also have become more visible on the street. Yet, given the fact they are female gang members in a patriarchal society, they are less easily suspected of any (gang) crimes due to their perceived harmlessness as women. Hence, they have in fact more opportunities to conduct gang related crimes in public without being suspected of gang affiliation.



An urban community riddled by gangs and permeated by the discourse of '*ver, oír y callar*'. Image: author.

While I did not have the chance to conduct an interview in a woman's private space during my fieldwork, as I was not allowed to for security reasons, I could imagine that some women would feel more at ease when being interviewed at home, if they perceive this place as a safe location (Oltmann 2016). Although, at the same time, one might wonder to what extent the home is a safe place for women to talk about their relationships with gangs and gang violence. Partner and domestic violence is often neglected and invisible, but at the same time widespread problem in Honduras (Sukhera et al. 2012). Furthermore, requirements linked to the issue of confidentiality, like anonymity, would be impossible to guarantee, since I would have known where they lived (Yee and Andrews 2006). Most of my interviews took place in the public (the communities/*barrios*) or semi-public (the schools and detention centers) spaces. It was in these spaces that the issue of '*ver, oír y callar*', and thus subsequently the 'agreed upon silences', became very clear. At the same time, one could notice a shift in discourse when during the fieldwork I moved with people between the public, semi-public and even private spaces.

Wandering around in the communities, I quickly grasped the common understanding of distrust in the authorities (cf. Hume 2009b) and hence the wariness people upheld towards one another, which subsequently fostered the silences. Not only do citizens

mistrust the authorities due to the high levels of impunity⁴⁹, but also due to the perceived linkages between the authorities (e.g. police) and gangs or organized crime groups (Dudley 2016). Consequently, people are cautious about their discourse in the public and even more towards public authorities or other outsiders. Despite the efforts of police purification (AJS 2017), the common sense of not reporting any gang related crimes to the police still prevails. After all, it is feared that the police might pass on your name to the gang that would subsequently knock at your door. The phenomenon of '*secreto a voces*', in this regard, implies that everyone in the community is very well aware of what is going on and who is responsible for what. As such, one could argue that everyone is in some way or another, willingly or unwillingly, involved with the gangs. However, this '*ver, oír y callar*' should be understood as a way of coping with and surviving violence (Hume 2009a). The discourse that comes out of this is one of constant implicit referrals and wording. Gangs or gang members are being referred to as 'groups', 'them' or 'the boys'. Likewise, gang turf is referred to as 'up there' and their 'activities' would not be denoted as crimes or violence.

Without wanting to claim that there are strict boundaries between what I perceive as public or semi-public, or even private, spaces; in my fieldwork I labelled the schools and detention centers as semi-public spaces. Within gang controlled communities, schools as well as prisons are dominated by the gang. As such, the authorities of these spaces had to act in agreement with the gang rules. This could be very overt and unilaterally imposed, for example in the case of a juvenile detention center whereby the gang leader of the detention center prohibited any access by any authorities whatsoever, and even threatened with retaliation towards the director of the center (and his family) if he would not comply. However, in most cases it was more covert and with a feeling of mutual understanding or agreement. Although I would stress the fact that it is about a feeling or perceived mutual agreement. To illustrate this, during one of my interviews with a director of a school located in a gang zone, the director claimed on the one hand that he and his teachers govern within the school walls, but had to leave the faith of the pupils in the hands of their parents and the gang once they step outside the school gate. While claiming his authority within the school walls, at the same time the director struggled with his powerlessness. He narrated that sometimes gang members move about in the school and there is nothing he can do about it, because his freedom of choice and movement goes as far as the gang in power allows it to go.

What was of particular interest to me is that once you pay attention to the different discourses that are used in the different spaces, you also start to notice the (at times very clear but mostly implicit) shifts in discourses when moving between and within these spaces. To exemplify, I remember very well how one of my respondents was, surprisingly and against the usual customs, talking very openly about the gang issue (using explicit gang vocabulary) while we were meeting in his office in a school in a gang-controlled neighborhood. Once we left his office and continued our conversation on the

⁴⁹ Honduras is rated the 12th country with most impunity out of 69 countries that were evaluated worldwide. After Nicaragua, it has the highest impunity rates together with El Salvador in Central America (Global Impunity Dimensions 2017). In 2016 the Mission to Support the Fight against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (UFECIC-MP/MACCIH) was installed (OAS 2016), but it has inherently encountered setbacks and threats (Beltrán 2018).

playground, he refrained from using any gang related words and referred implicitly to what we were talking about to another teacher. A few instances later, when he drove us out of the community to be picked up by the NGO's driver, we passed by a couple of young men who were sitting on the corner of the street keeping watch. Although the boys were clearly gang members, he completely denied that fact. The further one moves away from the private to the public space, the more silent the discourse becomes.

What becomes clear from the above discussed issues is that one needs to be mindful of the culture of silence that might pervade the field. Trying to push through overttness in a field that is inherently covert, may cause more harm than good. The key is to listen to the silences and adapt one's discourse. Not being overt according to ethics committee standards does not mean one is being unethical in a moral sense. In the end, every overt research consists of covert elements. This is why a reflexive stance is of importance throughout the research process.

Conclusion: How to Reconcile Academic Ethics with Street Ethics?

Building on Winlow and Hall's (2012) problematization of the ethics committee, and the fact that the amount of overttness in the field should be placed on a continuum (McKenzie 2009), I agree with Macfarlane's (2010) proposition to apply a virtues based approach in conducting field research. Ethics committees should create a platform for a more open and dynamic discussion, instead of a single shot to defend one's research and receive ethical permission. In applying a reflective stance, the revision of ethics should be a responsive instead of a static process. The necessity for a continuous reflection should include a self-reflection, as well as a cultural reflexivity.

In a region that is riddled by organized crime, corruption and impunity, silence should be understood as a strategy to cope with and survive past and present crimes and violence (Mannergren Selimovic 2018). In a culture of '*ver, oír y callar*', whereby people are afraid to speak out against the gangs because of retaliation (Wilding 2014), silence is the only way to survive in the community (Hume 2009a). In respect to this culture of silence, I would like to discuss a few issues.

First of all, in accordance with the 'do no harm' principle, I had to adapt to the code of the street in order to be able to conduct field research. However unethical it felt at the beginning not to be able to say out loud, with the exact words as stipulated in my ethics form, the reason for my presence in the field (and not always being presented in the same way by my gatekeepers), I had to learn the local vocabulary and blend into the culture of silence. While I often felt I was being (unethically) covert, my verbal overttness was not welcomed either. I learned to talk about violence without pinpointing the crimes, to talk about the gangs without naming them, and to discuss the role of women in all of this without labelling anyone as either a perpetrator or victim.

Secondly, regarding the ethics boards, it should be recognized that in a world that is highly unethical, ethical dilemmas will inherently occur and cannot always be predicted or prevented (Morrison and Sacchetto 2017), nor is there a golden one-size-fits-all solution. Hence, I would argue for a more open and honest debate about research and ethics, in an atmosphere of learning and support, instead of perceiving ethics as a burden.

Finally, more attention should go to a structured form of (peer-)supervision. I felt mostly supported by colleagues who had similar experiences and struggles in the field, and hesitated to talk to people (colleagues, family or friends) who did not share these experiences. When talking to the latter, I often had the feeling I was shocking people (Theidon 2014) and talking to them left me with an empty feeling. Furthermore, within the evaluation of our research ethics, we should not only consider the (emotional and physical) harm of the people we research and physical harm of the researcher, but also include a review of how the researcher copes with vicarious traumatization. Up until now the latter has received most attention within a non-academic context, for example among psychologists and social welfare workers (Robinson and Ryder 2014). Hence, more research on vicarious traumatization in an academic setting is needed.

AJS. 2017. "In D.C., AJS President and Staff Present their Progress in Honduran Police Reform." <https://www.ajs-us.org/content/dc-ajs-president-and-staff-present-their-progress-honduran-police-reform>.

American Society of Criminology. 2015. "American Society of Criminology Code of Ethics." https://www.asc41.com/code%20of%20ethics%20copies/ASC_Code_of_Ethics_Draft.pdf.

Angrosino, Michael. 2007. *Doing Ethnographic and Observational Research*. London: Sage.

Beltrán, Adriana. 2018. "New Honduran Law Poses Threat to the Fight Against Corruption and Impunity. WOLA. <https://www.wola.org/2018/01/new-honduran-law-poses-threat-fight-corruption-impunity/>.

Biondi, Karina. 2016. *Sharing this Walk: An Ethnography of Prison Life and the PCC in Brazil* (J. F. Collins, Trans.). Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Bird, Susan, Delgado, Rutilio, Madrigal, Larry, Bayron Ochoa, John, and Tejeda, Walberto. 2007. "Constructing an Alternative Masculine Identity: the Experience of the Centro Bartolomé de las Casas and Oxfam America in El Salvador." *Gender & Development* 15(1): 111-121. doi: 10.1080/13552070601179227

British Society of Criminology. 2006. "Code of Ethics: Code of Ethics for Researchers in the Field of Criminology." <http://www.britisoccrim.org/docs/CodeofEthics.pdf>.

Clapp, Justin T., Gleason, Katharine A., and Joffe, Steven. 2017. "Justification and Authority in Institutional Review Board Decision Letters." *Social Science & Medicine* 194: 25-33. doi:10.1016/j.socscimed.2017.10.013

Cruz, José M. 2010. "Central American maras: from youth street gangs to transnational protection rackets." *Global Crime*, 11(4), 379-398. doi: 10.1080/17440572.2010.519518

- Dudley, Steven.** 2016. "Honduras Elites and Organized Crime: Introduction." InSight Crime, April 9. <https://www.insightcrime.org/investigations/honduras-elites-and-organized-crime-introduction/>.
- El Herald.** 2016. "Descifrada la Estructura de las Maras y Pandillas de Honduras." El Herald, May 5. <https://www.elheraldo.hn/pais/957047-466/descifrada-la-estructura-de-las-maras-y-pandillas-de-honduras>.
- Global Impunity Dimensions.** 2017. "GII-2017 Global Impunity Index." Puebla, México: Fundación Universidad de las Américas. https://www.udlap.mx/ccsij/files/IGI-2017_eng.pdf.
- Gray, David. E.** 2018. *Doing Research in the Real World* [4th edition]. London: Sage.
- Guillemin, Marilys, and Gillam, Lynn.** 2004. "Ethics, Reflexivity, and "Ethically Important Moments" in Research." *Qualitative Inquiry* 10(2):261-280.
- Helm, Asa A.** 2001. "Franz Boas and Bronislaw Malinowsky: A Contrast, Comparison, and Analysis." *Lambda Alpha Journal* 31: 38-47.
- Hernández, Maria G., Nguyen, Jacqueline, Casanova, Saskias, Suárez-Orozco, Carola, and Saetermoe, Carrie L.** 2013. "Doing No Harm and Getting It Right: Guidelines for Ethical Research with Immigrant Communities." *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development* 2013(141): 43-60. doi:10.1002/cad.20042
- Hugman, Richard, Pittaway, Eileen, and Bartolomei, Linda.** 2011. "When 'Do No Harm' Is Not Enough: The Ethics of Research with Refugees and Other Vulnerable Groups." *The British Journal of Social Work* 41(7): 1271-1287. doi: 10.1093/bjsw/bcr013
- Hume, Mo.** 2009a. *The Politics of Violence: Gender, Conflict and Community in El Salvador*. MA and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Hume, Mo.** 2009b. "Researching the Gendered Silences of Violence in El Salvador." *Institute of Development Studies Bulletin* 40(3): 78-85.
- Ingold, Tim.** 2014. "That's enough about ethnography!" *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4(1): 383-395. doi:10.14318/hau4.1.021
- Israel, Mark, and Hay, Iain.** 2006. *Research Ethics for Social Scientists*. London: Sage.
- Jaspers, Patricia, Houtepen, Rob, and Horstman, Klasien.** 2013. "Ethical Review: Standardizing Procedures and Local Shaping of Ethical Review Practices." *Social Science & Medicine* 98: 311-318.
- Macfarlane, Bruce.** 2010. "Values and virtues in qualitative research." In *New Approach to Qualitative Research: Wisdom and Uncertainty*, edited by Maggi Saven-Baden, and Claire Howell Major, 18-27. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

- Mannergren Selimovic, Johanna.** 2018. "Gendered Silences in Post-Conflict Societies: A Typology." *Peacebuilding*: 1-15. doi: 10.1080/21647259.2018.1491681
- McKenzie, John S.** 2009. "'You Don't Know How Lucky You Are to Be Here!': Reflections on Covert Practices in an Overt Participant Observation Study." *Sociological Research Online* 14(2). Accessed June 26, 2019. doi:10.5153/sro.1925
- Morrison, Claudio, and Sacchetto, Devi.** 2018. "Research Ethics in an Unethical World: The Politics and Morality of Engaged Research." *Work, Employment and Society* 32(6): 1118-1129. doi:10.1177/0950017017726947
- OAS.** 2016. "Agreement between the government of the Republic of Honduras and the General Secretariat of the Organization of American States for the establishment of the Mission to Support the Fight Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras." <http://www.oas.org/documents/eng/press/agreement-MACCIH-jan19-2016.pdf>.
- Robinson, Robin A., and Ryder, Judith A.** 2014. "'Sometimes One Does That With Blinders On': Revisioning Care for Violent Girls." *Women & Criminal Justice* 24(3): 193-208.
- Shannon, Oltmann.** 2016. "Qualitative Interviews: A Methodological Discussion of the Interviewer and Respondent Contexts." *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 17(2): 1-16. doi:10.17169/fqs-17.2.2551
- Sociaal-Maatschappelijke Ethische Commissie (SMEC) – Social and Societal Ethics Committee.** n.d.. January 4, 2019, <https://www.kuleuven.be/english/research/integrity/smec>.
- Spicker, Paul.** 2011. "Ethical Covert Research." *Sociology* 45(1): 118-133. doi: 10.1177/0038038510387195
- Sukhera, Javeed, Catherine Cerulli, Barbara Gawinski, and A. Morse.** 2012. "Bridging Prevention and Health: Exploring Community Perceptions of Intimate Partner Violence in Rural Honduras." *Journal of Family Violence* 27(7): 707-14.
- Theidon, Kimerly.** 2014. "How Was Your Trip?" Self-Care for Researchers Working and Writing on Violence. Social Science Research Council. http://webarchive.ssrc.org/working-papers/DSD_ResearchSecurity_02_Theidon.pdf.
- Van Damme, Ellen.** 2017. "*Mareros* and *Pandilleros* in Honduras: The Reintegration of Youth Gang Members." In *Cybercrime, Organized Crime, and Societal Responses*, edited by Emilio C. Viano, 269-287. Switzerland: Springer.
- Vanclay, Frank, Baines, James T., and Taylor, C. Nicholas.** 2013. "Principles for Ethical Research Involving Humans: Ethical Professional Practice in Impact Assessment Part I." *Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal* 31(4): 243-253. doi:10.1080/14615517.2013.850307

- Wilding, Polly.** 2010. "‘New Violence’: Silencing women's experiences in the *favelas* of Brazil." *Journal of Latin American Studies* 42(4): 719-747. doi:10.1017/S0022216X10001343
- Wilding, Polly.** 2012. *Negotiating boundaries: Gender, violence and transformation in Brazil* (1 ed.). UK: Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Wilding, Polly.** 2014. "Gendered Meanings and Everyday Experiences of Violence in Urban Brazil." *Gender, Place and Culture* 21(2): 228. doi:10.1080/0966369X.2013.769430
- Winlow, Simon, and Hall, Steve.** 2012. "What is an ‘Ethics Committee’? Academic Governance in an Epoch of Belief and Incredulity." *British Journal of Criminology* 52:400-416.
- Wolcott, Harry F.** 2005. *The Art of Fieldwork* [2nd edition]. Plymouth, UK: AltaMira Press.
- Yee, Wan Ching, and Andrews, Jane. 2006. "Professional researcher or a ‘good guest’? Ethical dilemmas involved in researching children and families in the home setting." *Educational Review* 58(4): 397-413. doi:10.1080/00131910600971859

Acknowledgments

This research was funded by the Research Foundation-Flanders (FWO).