Lena Schick

Gaining Trust via WhatsApp

Remote Research in a Conflict Setting

Gaining Trust via WhatsApp: Remote Research in a Conflict Setting

Unexpectedly, over the last months my smartphone has become one of my most important research tools. I use it to communicate with people I got to know at the beginning of this year when I went to Colombia in order to prepare a long-term fieldwork, with whom I intend to collaborate on my PhD project, and whom I assured I would return this July. But instead of doing research in Colombia, I am in Germany, trying to stay in touch and to reschedule my research plans. In the current situation it is hard to say when I will be able to travel and under what conditions. International flights have only just started operating again, travel warnings for an increasing number of areas are being issued due to high infection numbers, and the overall situation is difficult to assess as the five-months lockdown has serious consequences for urban poor, migrants, and social activists, among others. Moreover, I do not want to expose my research partners, who have very limited access to healthcare, to an unnecessary risk. Thus, my fieldwork can be described as shifting from postponed to transformed.

Such a situation is probably familiar to many scholars who have to face the challenge of adapting a research design based on face-to-face interaction to the conditions caused directly or indirectly by COVID-19. In my case, I am trying to reconcile several challenges and pragmatic and ethical considerations. In this post I want to sketch some of them and put up for discussion three specific attempts to adapt my research to the current conditions.

¡No, *ahí no hay nada!* Research in a Conflict Setting

In my PhD project I intend to study how an Afro-Colombian community[1] experiences the consequences of the peace treaty signed between the guerrilla *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) and Colombia's Government in November 2016 and how they deal with the challenges of several new conflicts and threats that have arisen since.[2]

I planned to divide my research into three phases: one for preparation, one for the field research based on participant observation, biographical, and problem-centered interviews and visual methods, and a final one for the evaluation of my data. Before the Corona pandemic started, I was able to make a first preparatory visit (that I refer to at the beginning of this post), which I consider successful: I made contact with three communities that expressed their willingness to collaborate with me, got an impression of what is going on in the region and which challenges I should prepare for. The following episode illustrates some of the latter:

One Sunday afternoon, me and a friend visited one of the communities. I was a little nervous, since this was one of the communities where people seemed interested in collaborating, but with which I had tried unsuccessfully to arrange a longer visit for several weeks. I hoped to be able to take a walk through the village of which I had not seen much yet. After discussing for a while whether it would be a good idea to go for a walk because of an imminent thunderstorm, we started to walk around as I had wished for. Soon we arrived at a yard where we stopped and started talking about the growth and fertilization of Yucca plants and other crops. As mentioned, I wanted to see as much as possible of the village, and so during a break in the conversation I asked one of the men who accompanied us what was at the end of the street and if we could go there. In a few hundred meters' distance I saw a roof and a fence. He kept replying, however, "No, *ahí no hay nada*" – There is nothing, and that there was no reason to go there. I insisted until my friend gave me a look and whispered, "Give it a rest. Maybe there is a good reason for not going there that he simply does not want to name." I understood and was ashamed for having been so focused on my

preconceived plans that I did not even take this possibility into account. We went back to the house, talked a little longer and then headed home, without further signs of a thunderstorm.

The episode illustrates several challenges I am confronted with in my research: First, it showed me the subtlety of strategies of people living with such challenges and the importance of trust, silence, and avoidance. Second, it taught me that even though I might be theoretically aware of the special precautions to be observed in a conflict setting, I am used to them neither practically nor discursively. And third, it made clear that everything I do in this field is immediately connected to the responsibility not to put myself and the people I work with in danger. All the above points are not unique to my research and have been described by numerous scholars working in contexts of war, violence, and conflict (see e.g. Nordstrom 2008; Sluka 2008; Wiegink 2019). Anyway, they are important in my attempts to adapt my research design to remoteness.

Gaining Trust via WhatsApp: Attempts at Remote Research

Lena Schick

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WhatsApp
Telegram
Signal
Skype
Nachrichten
Apps
Telefon

Image 1. Tools of Research: Notebook, Pens, Literature and Smartphone. Photo: Lena Schick.

After leaving Colombia, I stayed in touch with people mostly through WhatsApp. When it turned out that I would not be able to return as expected I tried to extend this form of communication to small interviews. As conducting interviews on Skype or similar devices is difficult due to frequent power and internet failures in the region where I want to work, I tried voice-message interviews, but with little success. Whenever I asked questions about crops or the family people answered quickly and at length, but when I turned to questions concerning the situation of the community, I met with a long silence followed by a brief answer. I did not even dare to ask questions concerning the conflict because I was afraid to overstrain the relationship and fail to properly understand the reasons for silence. Learning which topics must be approached more sensibly or even avoided is complicated on WhatsApp; moreover, many communicative subtleties I probably wouldn't even recognize. For this reason, this avenue of communication mostly serves just to stay in touch with people.

One alternative is shifting the research design toward a more participatory form. At least in some of the communities I visited, I met people who were interested in scholarly research; these could become involved in the project as local researchers in their own right. I find this idea very intriguing as it would help me to collect data not just based on my own interviews but focus on topics my research partners have selected. At the same time, certain practical challenges aside, I am worried that such a research design might put my partners in additional danger, yet I also do not want to patronize them. Thus, the task on hand is to achieve a responsible equilibrium between the two positions.

Based on these reflections, I am currently thinking about changing my target group and focus on those people who either have willingly put themselves or were put in the line of fire and can rely, at least to a certain extent, on national and international recognition and support, namely, social activists. The advantages of working with

activists would be (1) that answering my questions would not be likely to increase the risk they face anyway, and (2) that they are used to being interviewed and many of them have access to the necessary technical devices. However, working with activists would reproduce an already existing asymmetry between those communities who are well organized and represented and those who are not. Yet I wonder if it would be illusory anyway to assume that my research would not produce or reinforce social asymmetries in some way.

To sum up: I am looking for a way to revise my research design in a way that balances various challenges and considerations. On the pragmatic side, I wonder how to deal with infrastructural challenges such as unstable internet connections or insufficient technical devices and how to collect data that are not based exclusively on language in order to avoid bulldozing over subtleties in people's interactions. On the ethical side, I ask myself how I can avoid putting people in danger, patronizing them, or reproducing existing inequalities. Such questions are obviously not unique to remote research; to the contrary, they are of importance in any research design concerning a conflict setting. However, the Corona pandemic has made me rethink my answers to them. I feel that in some contexts face-to-face research simply cannot be replaced by remote methods, since building trust by digital means is difficult. Moreover, as existing power asymmetries have been exacerbated in many ways, we must take care to remain sensible to them and think about ways of acknowledging them in our research.

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signed between the guerrilla *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) and Colombia's Government in November 2016 and how they deal with the challenges of several new conflicts and threats that have arisen since.

Footnotes

[1] I want to conduct research with an Afro-Colombian community in the Cauca region in the south of Colombia. The FARC has been present in large parts of the region and the inhabitants have been (and are) severely affected by the confrontation between guerrillas, paramilitary groups, and armed state and non-state actors. When I visited the region for the first time three years ago, many people I spoke with had hopes that a change for the better would happen. Now people say that although the situation had relaxed during the peace negotiations, they were concerned. The precariousness of the situation in Cauca is illustrated by the number of activists murdered. In all of Colombia, the organization INDEPAZ has counted 215 murdered activists by September 13 of this year, 72 of whom lived or worked in Cauca (INDEPAZ 2020). The Afro-Colombian communities are among the most vulnerable groups and face an especially critical situation (Amparo Alves 2019).

[2] The treaty ended more than 50 years of armed conflict; it includes various stipulations regarding the disarmament and demobilization of FARC members and transitional justice procedures and addresses many underlying factors of the armed conflict like the unequal distribution of land, rural deprivation, and the eradication of coca plantations. While some steps in the peace process were implemented rather smoothly, others, such as their reintegration of former combatants, the destruction of coca fields, the allocation of compensation, and a land reform have failed to be implemented so far, what has caused new complaints and conflicts. These conflicts have engendered consequences like an increasing number of social activists being threatened or murdered, attacks on demobilized former guerrilla fighters, and the

rearmament of dissident FARC groups. Massacres have happened in regions were the interests of various armed actors in terms of drugs and trade routes, gold mining, or the extraction of other resources clash.

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