

THE 'LONE FEMALE RESEARCHER':
ISOLATION AND SAFETY UPON ARRIVAL IN THE FIELD

VENETIA CONGDON

Introduction

My nonchalance upon entering the field reveals much about the preconceptions inherent in how we perceive different parts of the world. As an anthropologist researching food and identity in a Western European country, Spain, I had presumed that being female was essentially a non-issue when it came to my safety. I attended seminars on fieldwork security, but blithely believed they would be largely inapplicable to me. I wasn't going into a war zone or an area known to be unsafe to women, but an area with similar social norms. I knew from my preliminary research that in some areas of Spain conservative attitudes towards women existed, particularly in the south (Andalucía) and central areas of the country (Pink 1997; Brandes 1987; Delamont 1995, Chapter 9). Again, I thought this was irrelevant, as I was to be based in Catalonia, located in the north-east. The extant literature indicated that a central part of Catalan identity (my broad area of research) included self-differentiation from the repressive conservatism associated with the rest of Spain. Catalonia, in contrast, was presented as a modern, open society, forward-looking, innovative and cosmopolitan (Tree 2011; Llobera 2004; Asano-Tamanoi 1987). In preparing for my arrival in the field, I had thought that here, at least, attitudes to gender, safety risks and behaviour would be more or less identical to that of my home country, England. I soon discovered, however, through various experiences to be discussed here, that this was not the case. Moreover, the isolation experienced by a newly arrived field researcher worsens the feelings of vulnerability these happenings induce. This factor, which female researchers might not anticipate prior to entering the field, will be the topic of this article.

Fieldwork is a challenging experience. Most anthropologists, save those engaging in so-called 'anthropology at home', enter an 'alien' context. We often go as independent, individual researchers, without affiliation in the field, which makes our position more difficult in comparison with other 'temporary migrants' (for that is what we are, effectively). Most migrants are able to find support in an enclave of fellow expatriates, something today's anthropologists are strenuously advised *not* to do. Without our usual support networks, we must make our own way. More than this, we must integrate with our surroundings, actively pursue contacts in the field, and above all interact with local inhabitants. In the early stages

of fieldwork these interactions may not be easy to orchestrate, and they only serve to highlight the fieldworker's isolation. Surprisingly, this may be worse in large cities than in smaller communities.

It is this sense of isolation that I believe is at the crux of how we interpret gender-related difficulties in the field. While such experiences are unpleasant anywhere, in this article I suggest that they are doubly difficult in the context of recent arrival in the field site. This process is already difficult enough, since we may be grappling with a new language, bureaucratic frustrations and (for first-time ethnographers) concerns about whether we are really 'up to' doing fieldwork. When dealing with the gender-related problems discussed in this paper, I really missed the personal, face-to-face interaction with trusted friends and family back in the UK. Instead of being able to discuss, and dismiss, these experiences of gendered risk within customary support networks, the field researcher has to cope with them alone.

I will begin with a brief discussion of my experiences of street harassment in Barcelona and my reactions to them as a woman alone in a new location. I remained in Barcelona for two months in the summer of 2012, preparing to move to my intended field site of Vic (population 45,000). I moved to Vic in early August, at a time, I later learned, when most of its residents are away on holiday. It was here that I experienced two other types of gender-related difficulties, which I will discuss in detail: one concerning a neighbour, and the other language exchanges. Both incidents came about because of a desire to speak to locals who could potentially become informants, and also through my desire to build up what I have called a 'support network' of informants and friends as possible sources of help in times of need. It was precisely this kind of network that I had lacked in Barcelona, and so eagerly wanted to cultivate in Vic. These incidents also proved useful in gaining deeper insight into some relevant aspects of the field, for example, fault lines in the local community.

Barcelona experiences: street harassment

As I soon found once I arrived in Barcelona, gender attitudes were quite different to those in the UK, particularly when it came to street harassment. I had experienced few incidents of such harassment in my life in the UK, amounting to minor irritations soon forgotten. I was therefore unprepared for the intensity of street harassment and the impunity of its perpetrators in Barcelona.

As a tourist destination, Barcelona has a fairly good reputation for women travellers. Living there long-term as a woman, however, one is soon exposed to regular street harassment. This might include remarks like *que guapa/maca* (how pretty), remarks on one's appearance, or lengthier taunts and pick-up lines. Choice examples include: 'Your mama must have eaten lots of sweets, to have someone as sweet as you'; or 'Get out of the sun sweetie, don't you know that bonbons can melt?' On paper, such phrases seem overblown and humorous. Yet the reality of their delivery on the street can be terrifying and humiliating. Shouted after you or into your face, in a foreign language you're still struggling to master, they are not isolated incidents. A continual dread of their recurrence came to colour daily life in the first months of fieldwork.

I was also followed several times on the street by men, once into a poorly lit stairwell. Fortunately, these incidents all occurred during daylight, and stopped when I made it clear I knew I was being followed. In the latter incident, the follower tried talking to me, but when I didn't respond, he sauntered off. Retrospectively, I do not think he wanted to do me harm – it seemed more a case of him wanting to 'try his luck' (a sense of opportunism often pervades these actions). Nonetheless I found his behaviour both frightening and offensive. At first glance, this experience might not seem unusual or particularly threatening. What makes it so, however, is the context: in the fieldwork setting anthropologists have no choice but to socialise and actively participate in the surrounding social world. In doing so, exposure to these experiences is unavoidable. On top of this, our normal sources of support with whom we could discuss such incidents are absent, making coping doubly hard.

Aside from the emotional stress these experiences occasioned, the other frustration came from the reaction of women around me to these instances of sexual harassment. Generally, it was seen as a necessary evil, as 'what men do'. Some older women even suggested that I should feel flattered that I was on the receiving end of this attention – this wouldn't last forever, after all. One woman in her mid-30s told me that a woman is supposed to feel a certain *frisson* every time she receives a 'compliment' or remark in the street, regardless of who is giving it. She admitted that she disliked this attention herself, but she had grown used to it, as she knew there was generally no malicious or criminal intent behind it. These attitudes suggest a depressing normalization of this kind of behaviour towards women, even amongst women themselves.

Situation 1: the neighbour

I had been surprised by my experiences in Barcelona, but had hardened myself against them. I was also looking forward to leaving them behind when I moved to Vic. With its small-town atmosphere, I expected that behaviour would be different here. I was therefore not prepared for a repeat of my encounters in Barcelona. On the second evening after I moved in, I took the lift downstairs from my upper-floor apartment on the *Plaça Major* (main square) to search out supper in one of the many restaurants in the old quarter. On the floor below the lift stopped, admitting a short, bespectacled, pot-bellied man. He grinned when he saw me, and I smiled back politely. Vic was still new, and I was keen to talk to its locals – perhaps this might be a key informant? We exchanged a few neighbourly pleasantries, he asking whether I was living here, where I was from, and I asked a few things about living in the building, internet access, etc. On the ground floor, I checked my post-box in the small area in the entrance. He made sure that I went first, so he was effectively blocking my exit. Casually, he asked if I lived alone. Caught off guard and flustered, I replied with a yes, and mentioned that I was looking to meet people in the building. I immediately regretted it, realising how trusting I had been. Uncomfortable with the situation, I pushed past his bulk to leave the building. As I went by, he leered that if I ever wanted any company I just had to come downstairs, as he knew a lot of local bars where he could take me. I declined, and quickly left.

While I found this experience distasteful, I tried to brush it off – another opportunistic interaction, like those I had experienced in Barcelona. What I had not expected was that in the weeks afterwards, if he saw me in the street, he'd start shouting at me, trying to get my attention. This happened in front of cafes, in full view of patrons, in humiliating and intimidating encounters. I came to dread leaving my apartment or returning when I was out. I dreaded remaining in that building, and in Vic, for a year. I was also concerned for my personal safety, since my flat was directly above his (fortunately, nothing came of this).

What troubled me most was the effect this was having on my position in the field. Had I in some way offended a key informant with great influence? Should I have played along to meet other locals? Having read about how gossip works in Mediterranean societies (e.g. Asano-Tamanoi 1987; Gilmore 1987), I wondered if I had gained a 'bad' reputation in some way from my neighbour's behaviour. I seriously considered moving out of the building, or even changing field sites. After much reflection, I decided to return to the UK for a week at the end of August for a brief respite. I returned home feeling like a failure for not coping and giving in to homesickness.

The loneliness of the newly arrived field-researcher

When considering my reactions to my early fieldwork experiences, I was often struck by how they differed to those of later fieldwork. In fact, after a few months, if I received some catcall or other street harassment, my usual reaction would be a quick, '*vés t'en a la merda, malparit*' (an exact translation cannot be printed here, but a toned down version is 'Go to hell, idiot') or some other choice Catalan phrase, before continuing on my way. I found it useful to have a selection of such phrases, and I would advise all researchers to learn a few for when they need to assert themselves in the field! My emotion in these later instances would still be one of anger, but it did not have the crushing sense of powerlessness and isolation that similar experiences brought out at the start of fieldwork.

The early part of fieldwork is undoubtedly the most challenging. As discussed earlier, little support is typically available in the first few months, and the anthropologist must strike out on her own. At this time the field site is new and exciting, overwhelming with novel experiences, but also isolating. A foreign language situation adds to the disjuncture on arrival, even with prior study. Interactions with people around the researcher are essential, more so than in other contexts, which requires caution. At the same time, vigilance should not limit interaction, since the main activity of the anthropologist is to speak to local informants. Finding a middle ground between all these conflicting pressures is at times bewildering.

In this context, one unpleasant interaction will be far more distressing since it challenges an anthropologist's capacity to perform the very fundamental task of research. In Vic, one of my very first interactions was an unpleasant one. I internalised this, concluding that I was a bad researcher for having unwittingly stumbled into the situation, and I became unwilling to put myself out into the field. Overall, the incident seriously undermined my self-confidence for the early part of fieldwork (far more so than if it had occurred at a later stage).

I had also originally planned to make a visit to all the tenants in my building, to inform them of my existence and research, with the hope of finding informants or a support network. I had heard of this strategy in the field (e.g. Hendry 1999), and thought it might be beneficial. Naturally, after this experience I was strongly dissuaded, and sadly I did not develop a close relationship with any of my neighbours in the building. I had anticipated that my introductions would entail me coming into tenants' flats, and it was also frightening to

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think that one of my strategies had effectively been to place myself in risky situations (ironically, this experience allowed me to avoid that).

Resolution

Fortunately, the experience resolved itself. In September I gathered a selection of acquaintances, not just informants, but also friends to whom I could turn to for help. From an older couple, P and A, who also lived on the *Plaça*, I later learned that my unfortunate neighbour was one of the Castilian-speakers who had moved to Catalonia during the mass internal migration under Franco in the 1960s and 1970s. In Vic there were regular complaints about this group, since most of them had not learned Catalan or attempted to integrate, they and often voted for the anti-Catalan *Partido Popular* in elections. My attitude was frequently contrasted with this group, since I came to Vic speaking Catalan, studying and participating in Catalan culture and identity. His behaviour did not surprise them, particularly since the stereotypical Castilian is said to exhibit misogynistic *machismo* (although this can be found amongst Catalans too). This allayed my concerns about having insulted a potential gatekeeper, a concern that is worth bearing in mind, as other contributions to this issue show.

After I told them about the problem, both were angry that this had been one of my first experiences of their city. P remarked that he might ‘say something’ to my neighbour, since he knew most inhabitants of the *Plaça*. What interested me most about this interaction was that my experience had revealed a socio-linguistic fault line in Vic that still existed between Castilian- and Catalan-speakers.

I should say that after this conversation, I did not encounter any further problems with the neighbour. Through the acquisition of a support network, I therefore managed to overcome this particular fieldwork issue. In making more contacts in the field, I had not only gained a useful source of advice and help, but also a greater sense of security. I was no longer a vulnerable unknown woman, but was connected to an increasingly large circle of Vic citizens.

Situation 2: language exchanges

My support network came from a variety of sources. Some were the groups of people I met through Catalan cultural groups, one or two through contacts in the UK, and others through food courses I participated in as part of my research. Another useful way of meeting informants was through language exchanges, and indeed I met one of my closest friends in

the field through one such program. Standard exchanges involve two people from different language backgrounds meeting to practice speaking each other's language. Due to the economic downturn, many Spaniards are turning to languages as a means of improving their CVs. As a native English speaker, I was an ideal partner for such an exchange.

Despite their usefulness, language exchanges occasionally proved problematic. As in any interaction in the field, there is an obvious risk in meeting someone new for the first time. Where possible, I always tried to meet new informants in a public place instead of their home, and this also applied to language exchanges. I also always insisted the first meeting take place in a café or bar not too close to my home, so it would be harder to guess where I lived, and at a busy time of day. If I had any problems, the likelihood of successfully being followed was less. Conversely, I made sure to know the area and refused suggestions of places to meet in districts that were not within fifteen minutes walking distance from my home. It was only on second meetings that I met exchange partners in one of the many bars in the *Plaça* opposite my house.

To attract exchange partners, I put up several posters in language schools, the main library and public notice boards saying that I was an English doctoral student seeking to practice my Catalan or Spanish. I included my first name, email address and contact number. I had some concerns about placing such personal information in public areas, yet to meet anyone in the field (not just on language exchanges), passing personal contact information to strangers is often unavoidable. Again, this is a calculated risk I had to take to acquire informants.

In practice, however, sharing personal details in public proved less of a problem than the wording I used in the notice. Unlike in English, the Catalan word for student can be either masculine or feminine, '*estudiant*' or '*estudianta*'. The masculine form is often used to describe both men and women, but this is not technically correct. Wanting to write correct Catalan, I had, without thinking, put '*estudianta*', thus immediately disclosing my gender.

This resulted in some problems, as I received several phone calls from men who had no intention of practising English but merely wanted to meet women. This happened face-to-face on two occasions, once when I met up with a Catalan speaker, and later with a Spanish speaker from outside Catalonia (I had hoped to get an alternative view on the Catalan situation). Soon into the conversation, it became obvious they saw an English woman more as a potential girlfriend or sexual partner than a language exchange partner. In both situations, I quickly left and cut off all contact.

On mentioning some of these experiences to my closer friends and informants in the field, they remarked that some of my problems might have arisen because I had explicitly stated that I was an *English* woman. Throughout fieldwork, my informants often showed me news reports of the latest drunken antics of British tourists in Barcelona, much to their amusement. British inebriation makes a popular topic of sensationalist short articles, and most of the ones I saw concerned women and/or students. The stereotype of the British female abroad in Catalonia is therefore one of heavy drinking, hard partying and promiscuity. In short, an English, female student was too good an opportunity to miss for certain men. It is also possible that this stereotype influenced the behaviour of my neighbour in the first example. After these experiences I took to wearing wedding rings on the ring finger of each hand to suggest I was 'attached' and not open to romantic or sexual relationships.

Conclusions and recommendations

Since this brief exposition of my experiences is intended to help future researchers, I will conclude by briefly summing up my recommendations. Many of these suggestions will therefore be particularly aimed at female researchers, though some are more general and will apply to male researchers too. First, accept that the start of fieldwork is a disorientating experience. Immerse yourself slowly; don't rush. In foreign language contexts, make plans to learn the language as soon as possible, and take every opportunity to practice. Accept too that you will go through phases of liking and loathing your field site. The location will be new and exciting at first, then when the novelty wears off this leads to a period of self-doubt and loneliness, eventually leading to acceptance and resolution once you gain familiarity. Above all, don't be too self-critical about the first few weeks of fieldwork: most data is collected after the initial, unfamiliar phase has passed. Don't worry either about the quality of your data at this stage, or even what to collect. As you familiarise yourself with the field, you will gradually learn what is appropriate to pursue.

Build a support network as soon as you feel comfortable. This will alleviate feelings of loneliness, improve your self-confidence as a field researcher and create situations for meeting potential informants. Be aware too that building this support network might place you in some difficult situations, especially for female researchers. A researcher must make an active effort to get to know people in the field, but must also exercise caution in her (or his) interactions (this might not be easy during the up-beat, 'honeymoon' phase). Despite caution, unpleasant situations may still arise. This is often unavoidable and is not the fault of

the researcher. Also be aware of the stereotypes that might exist around the researcher's background, including nationality.

In the long term, my experience with my neighbour made me more wary of interactions in the field, and I will never know the effects of this decision on my fieldwork. We must accept that negative experiences in the field will affect our data collection and the direction of our research. The researcher's safety is paramount, and if our instincts tell us to avoid a situation then we should follow them, despite the loss of potentially useful data. Having a support network in this situation is a boon: inform trusted individuals if you are going into a potentially hazardous situation, for example, visiting a new informant's home for preliminary meetings. This may be particularly applicable to women, where issues of safety in these instances might be more pertinent, or where this would contravene social norms (again, a support network can be useful for this sort of information).

These incidents represent a few of the many challenges I experienced in the field; of course, they were not all connected to the question of gender or issues of sexuality. Sometimes frustrations in the field might be related to the petty practicalities of everyday living. Others might be connected to the relations we have in the field, which need to be managed post-fieldwork. A few months before writing this paper, I fell out with an older informant who had been a close friend in the field. It seemed that she had expected the relationship to be a reciprocal one, whereby my family and I helped her daughter, who was studying in London at the time of fieldwork. In some ways, I had been keen to cultivate her effusive friendship because of my loneliness and concerns about safety, not realizing what was expected in return. This is something else that the experience of isolation in the field may bring out: in our eagerness to ingratiate ourselves, we optimistically ignore the warning signs we would otherwise notice 'at home'. Ethnographic fieldwork is perhaps one of the most challenging experiences in the social sciences. However, it is also one of the most rewarding. Once successfully navigated, these problems allow us to develop and mature, both as researchers and individuals, and to contribute to a better understanding of the subject we study.

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