

‘LISTEN TO YOUR MOTHER’:

NEGOTIATING GENDER-BASED SAFE SPACES DURING FIELDWORK

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Introduction

‘Where is the man (*cadê o homem*)?’ an indigenous Canela man¹ asked me one morning in April 2012 as I was walking back to my mother’s thatched-roof house after taking my early-dawn bath in the stream. He was asking about my partner, who was from the United States like myself, and who had been visiting me in the Canela indigenous village of Escalvado in northeast Brazil where I was conducting my fieldwork. My partner had left for the major city of Teresina, where he had been working a few days earlier, yet community members continued to ask after him because, as this was the beginning of my fieldwork, they assumed that ‘the man’ was the anthropological fieldworker. By my second month there, I had successfully convinced most people (and, importantly, my research assistants) that I was in fact the anthropologist, yet my gender identity as a female and the local socio-cultural assumptions with which it was imbued continued to play a significant role throughout my fieldwork in myriad ways. It is important to note that my gender often worked to my advantage, since a major part of my research focused on understanding women’s gardening knowledge and experiences, and that I had many positive and safe experiences that shaped my fieldwork as a whole. At the same time, however, I experienced gender-based threats to my personal safety that will be the focus of this article, in accordance with the special issue’s focus on sexuality and danger in anthropological fieldwork.

While the gendered fieldwork experiences of social-science researchers have received increasing analytical attention over the past few decades (cf. Warren 1988; Schenk-Sandbergen 1995; Arendell 1997; Gill and Maclean 2002; Bellamy et al. 2011), less attention has been paid to fieldwork safety issues that deal specifically with gender and sexual identity (Sharp and Kremer 2006: 318). In addition, suggestions and advice for promoting gender-based safety in some types of fieldwork may not be appropriate in all contexts. Encouraging female researchers to dress conservatively (Green et al. 1993), use cell phones (Kenyon and

¹ Due to the sensitive nature of the fieldwork material I discuss, I have chosen not to include the names of Canela community members in this article.

Hawker 1999) and give trusted friends or colleagues one's detailed fieldwork itinerary (Sharp and Kremer 2006: 326) may prove useful in developed countries and/or urban areas, but in my experience none of these suggestions would have been applicable. The Canela are not concerned with women's modest dress (having traditionally worn very little clothing, as is the case with many indigenous communities), there are no cell phone towers within at least forty miles of the indigenous territory, and my itinerary was widely variable due to the complicated logistics of living in a rural area with poor road conditions.

Thus, in this article I provide a post-fieldwork risk assessment of gender-based threats to personal safety in order to provide strategies for future fieldwork researchers contemplating research in relatively remote and inaccessible contexts. I discuss my experiences travelling between the indigenous community and the town of Barra do Corda in the largely rural area of Maranhão in northeast Brazil, as well as certain threatening situations that some Canela women and I experienced in the indigenous village. I conclude the article by suggesting potential strategies for promoting gender-based safety which emerged throughout my fieldwork, including listening to others' voices, putting forward one's own voice, and taking into account overlapping layers of power and inequality between oneself and others that shape inter-personal fieldwork experiences on multiple levels (cf. Rubenstein 2004). By adopting these strategies, I suggest that researchers can negotiate a safe space within which the immensely rewarding experience of conducting fieldwork can be enjoyed. For despite the challenges, some of which I discuss here, finding and creating a safe space for myself greatly enriched my fieldwork experience in both personal and academic ways.

Gender-based threats to personal safety: transportation, bathing and domestic violence

Transportation

Travelling to and from one's fieldwork site can be a safe and easy experience for many researchers, yet in my experience this was one of my primary fieldwork challenges. The village of Escalvado is located approximately forty miles from the town of Barra do Corda, yet driving along the dirt and sand roads can take anywhere between four and eight hours. The Canela community has become accustomed to receiving large gifts of manufactured goods and foodstuffs from anthropologists, particularly foreign ones (cf. Crocker and Crocker 2004: 28; Miller 2015: 19-21), and I therefore travelled between Escalvado village and Barra do Corda to replenish my supply of gifts for the family into which I had been adopted and the community at large. Catching a ride from the Canela truck driver was usually possible, but his schedule varied, and I often had to wait for days at a time to receive a ride to and from the

village. The journey usually involved the truck breaking down at some point along the way, owing to the sandy soil in the Cerrado ('savannah') region of Brazil.

These logistical issues were compounded by the gender-related safety issue of travelling alone as a foreign woman. All the truck-drivers were men, and although I knew and trusted the Canela truck driver and his family, at times his truck was unavailable. In those instances, finding a non-indigenous Brazilian driver to give me a safe ride proved to be somewhat difficult. For example, after the festivities surrounding the final male ritual initiation period in June 2012, my adoptive Canela mother asked a local non-indigenous man who was visiting the village if he could drive me back into town. Although she knew the man and told me that he was a 'good person', when he saw me standing next to her he responded to our request with a sexual innuendo that was vaguely predatory. Shortly afterwards, my Canela mother and father declared that they did not feel comfortable with me riding in his truck, and they made other arrangements for my travel. I was perfectly willing to ride with this first man, but my mother insisted it would not be safe owing to the comment he made.

In another instance, a non-indigenous truck-driver visiting the village called on my Canela family in our home and was surprised to see me there. This man, I was told, was a 'hit man' or contract killer in the region (or was perhaps an associate of one; the distinction was unclear). While I was in my 'room' (a section of the thatched-roof hut that had its own door), he made a sexual comment about me and asked my mother if I was single. She quickly responded that I was married, which seemed to mollify him, and he left the house. Nevertheless, I became nervous each time I saw him driving past our house and the bathing spot where I would bathe, and I vowed never to ask him for a ride, regardless of my need.

In both of these instances – and, indeed, in others – my identity as a foreign female put me at risk of sexual harassment and perhaps assault from some non-indigenous truck-drivers in the region. Whilst I received rides safely from both indigenous and non-indigenous drivers throughout my year of fieldwork, there were times such as those described above when I had to follow the advice of my Canela family and my own instincts and turn down rides from men who made me (or my Canela mother) uncomfortable. I quickly learned to pay attention to the small signs of feeling comfort or discomfort in dealing with these relative strangers. Although I had expected transportation to be an ongoing logistical headache in my pre-fieldwork risk assessment, I did not realize that my gender and 'outsider' status in terms of north-east Brazilian society would sometimes exacerbate the transportation challenges. Overcoming the challenge of travelling to and from the village required the use of my own

vigilant common sense and my ability to listen to and respect the advice of my Canela family, especially my mother.

Bathing

In the Canela community, groups of women and men bathe separately in a number of designated bathing spots in streams near the main village space. Couples sometimes bathe alone in more secluded spots, either with or without their children, and men occasionally use these secluded areas to bathe alone. It is not the custom, however, for women to bathe alone. Although I was aware of this custom at the beginning of my fieldwork, I initially stubbornly refused to bathe in the communal women's area, preferring to bathe alone in a more secluded couple's area. I reasoned with myself that because I was an outside researcher, I could exist in an 'androcentric' category (cf. Schenk-Sandbergen 1995: WS-38) wherein I could identify as a woman and be concerned with women's issues in my research, yet simultaneously avoid the everyday realities and limitations of living as a woman in Escalvado. Needless to say, it quickly became apparent that I was wrong in this initial assumption. I soon began to hear stories of women being attacked while bathing alone when visiting their forest plots, many of which are located at least a day's walk away from the main village. In these remote areas women sometimes did not have the protection of bathing in a large group, which made them vulnerable to sexual assaults from men. One woman described to me her experience of being attacked while bathing near her forest garden many years ago. We were talking with a group of women in my mother's house, and I noted our conversation in my field diary:

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The woman said she was attacked by a man in an old garden area (*seitor da roça*) when she was younger, in 1993. She fought him off by kicking him in the groin and freed herself, running away. [...] As we were talking about bathing, I said I would not go by myself anymore and would always go with my 'sister' [a teenage girl in my Canela family]. Then the women told me that a few days ago a man came near the bridge bathing spot while I was bathing and told my sister that if I had been alone, he would have tried to have sex with me—forcibly. I was actually terrified by this...I will never go to the couple's bathing spot by myself ever again. It will only be the bridge area with my sister, and she knows what women do so it will not be a problem.

As this diary entry discloses, I could not exist in an un-gendered state whilst living with the community. On the one hand, I played the role of the foreign outsider who could participate in and experience activities that were exclusively male, such as the afternoon political meetings of the male elders in the ceremonial centre of the village, as well as typically female activities such as cooking, childcare and tending to crops in garden plots. On the other hand, my gender marked me out as vulnerable to male-dominated attacks, and in terms of bathing I needed to listen to the Canela women's voices and act as they did by bathing with other women (and sometimes children). While this potential danger of fieldwork was not something I had expected, the rapport I developed with my Canela mother, sisters, and other women increased my safety and allowed me to listen to and empathize with their personal experiences of gender-based assault.

Domestic Violence

Recent studies have pointed out the lack of discussion surrounding the potential psychological and physical effects on researchers of conducting fieldwork on gender-based violence (Sikweyiya and Jewkes 2011: 1094-1095; Sharp and Kremer 2006: 322). While my main research centred on gardening practices and biodiversity maintenance, women's experiences of domestic violence, a facet of everyday life, became a frequent topic of conversation. I was therefore placed in the precarious situation of listening to these women's experiences and wanting to support them while simultaneously conducting fieldwork with and giving monetary assistance to some of the perpetrators of violence against them. While I did not experience a threat to my own personal safety due to domestic violence, living among women who had been victimized and men who had committed abuse took an emotional toll. I continually had to negotiate my dual roles of female friend and confidante to certain women, and foreign anthropological researcher to most women and men.

For example, I was shocked when I discovered that the man in one of the couples with whom I had grown quite close had previously physically abused his wife for many years. During an interview, she calmly recounted to me how he had beaten her for much of their marriage, but ever since he had converted to evangelical Christianity and stopped drinking the abuse had stopped. Perhaps even more surprisingly, he too admitted during a separate interview that he had been abusive before his conversion, yet made a point of stating that he would never treat his wife that way again. Another older woman recounted how she had tried to run away from her husband when she was first married, but he had found her and beaten her. She stayed in the marriage 'for survival' because of the benefits having a husband brings

to managing a subsistence garden plot. They have been married for decades now, and it seemed like the abuse had not continued. Although I did not know initially what my role should be after hearing this information, it appeared that the very act of telling me their stories was therapeutic for the women and even perhaps for the man who confessed his past abuse to me. That women who have experienced gender-based violence see ‘value’ in being asked about and discussing their experiences with researchers has been documented elsewhere (Sikweyiya and Jewkes 2011: 1099). Thus, I found myself continually negotiating a safe, physical space for the women and myself to discuss these sensitive issues – typically in a smaller thatched-roof house without other men, women or children present. Once in this safe space, the women talked freely and openly about their life experiences, something that appeared valuable to them.

Conclusion: recognizing the importance of voice and gendered power relations in fieldwork

As the examples above suggest, promoting gender-based safety in fieldwork is a complicated and ongoing process that will undoubtedly vary widely according to fieldwork context and the gender identity of the researcher. Nevertheless, based on the post-fieldwork risk assessment provided in this article, I offer three main points of advice that may be of use to future researchers of varied gender and sexual identities, especially those contemplating fieldwork in relatively remote and inaccessible areas of the world. The three points of advice are as follows:

Listen to the voices of others

Throughout fieldwork, listening to the advice of my Canela mothers undoubtedly kept me safe from gender-based threats to my safety. When I initially ignored my mother’s advice to refrain from bathing alone, for example, I was threatened with sexual assault, hence I quickly learned to pay attention to the voices of those community members with whom I had developed the most rapport. Thus, when my Canela mother and father voiced their concern about my travelling with a truck-driver who made lewd comments about me, I respectfully listened to their opinion and took their advice. In addition, the close relationships I developed with certain women in the community enabled them to share their difficult experiences of assault and domestic violence, and the women appeared to find our conversations beneficial.

Respectfully put forward your own voice

Building on the first point of advice, developing a rapport with my Canela mother and other women allowed me to voice my concerns about my own (and their) safety in a respectful way. Rather than pretend I was not bothered by the threatening comments that both non-indigenous and indigenous men made about me throughout my fieldwork, I brought these issues to my mother, who in turn looked for ways to keep me safe. Her protective caring for me extended to issues of general safety as well. When I became extremely ill, for example, she arranged for a truck-driver to take me back to town immediately, even though no one was planning a journey for many days. I would therefore suggest that researchers find their own 'mother' (or whomever might fall into this category) whom they can listen to and support, and from whom they can ask for advice and assistance when needed.

Take into account overlapping layers of power and inequality

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, promoting gender-based safety in fieldwork involves a recognition of the researcher's multiple and shifting roles, and how they articulate with overlapping layers of power and inequality in the fieldwork context. I alternately played the roles of a relatively powerful 'Western' (U.S. citizen) anthropologist, imparting highly valued goods and money to members of a historically marginalized indigenous community, and a woman vulnerable to sexual harassment and assault in rural Maranhão, and in the indigenous community itself. Canela men and women also took on different roles based on shifting power dynamics, experiencing systematic socio-economic and socio-political inequality in their relationships with outsiders, while at the same time serving as powerful male community leaders and valued women who own houses and gardens under the matrilineal kinship system. These complex and overlapping dynamics of power and inequality often have deep historical roots, as is the case in lowland South America, where the legacy of oppressive colonial structures continues to inform indigenous relationships with non-indigenous local and foreign actors (cf. Rubenstein 2004). While Rubenstein discusses shifting power dynamics in the context of a consensual sexual relationship between a researcher (himself) and a local indigenous Shuar woman (ibid.: 1059), these dynamics also come to the fore in other gendered fieldwork encounters. Through this three-pronged approach involving listening to others' voices, respectfully putting forward one's own voice and recognizing how power and inequality inform fieldwork encounters, I suggest that it is possible to promote gender-based safety and negotiate a safe space for oneself and others to conduct (and enjoy!) anthropological fieldwork. Despite the issues I discuss in this article within the safe space I

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created for myself I was able to experience many enjoyable moments that made my fieldwork a singular and rewarding experience.

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