



Breaking Community Silences: Field Research Reflections from Guatemala and Peru

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The following reflection is based upon four months of field research in Guatemala and Peru. Using life story method, my research examined if and how social fabric has been rebuilt in post-conflict communities. An initial observation has been the important use and practice of silence by community members. Although silences are often overlooked during field work, I found that they provide important truths about post-conflict realities. What is not talked about can be more revealing than what is being discussed. Trying to access these silences, however, is risky and poses a series of ethical dilemmas. I found silences are often used as a protective strategy, both at the individual and communal level. As researchers begin to work in communities; these silences are often broken through interviews which can have ramifications on the well-being of the individual and community. This reflection piece will map out my personal field research experience in these silent spaces and identify how I tried to overcome these challenges and minimize possible consequences.

I was often told by community members that they no longer want to remember the conflict because it is too painful to do so. How should researchers work in post-conflict communities where its members want to forget and move on? It is impossible to avoid asking about the periods of violence, if one wants to contextualize post-conflict dynamics. When silence, however, is being used as a protection strategy, what are the ethical protocols that researchers should follow under these situations? Are we re-opening wounds that were difficult to close in the first place?

Silence is also practiced at the collective level, particularly to protect the integrity and well-being of the community. Some communities feel guilty about their conduct during the conflict and they have learned to keep quiet about these experiences. According to one respondent, "if we don't talk about it, then it doesn't exist." This practice is particularly important in communities where victims and perpetrators live side-by-side and it is extremely difficult to co-exist in harmony. Remembering and talking about intimate episodes of violence make it even more problematic. It was after interviewing a victim and a perpetrator of torture living in the same community that I learned why some silences needed to be respected. However, researchers asking about their lives during and post conflict make these silences more noticeable. When silences are an important part of the individual and collective well-being of post-conflict communities, are researchers doing more harm than good?