

Risk and Fear in Researching Violence

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Abstract This briefing note discusses the part played by risk and fear in the process of research into citizenship and violence in Brazil. Rio's *favelas* are marked by extreme violence, partly through publicised acts of brutality, and partly by the numerous acts of violence which do not garner any public attention but which dramatically affect people's lives. Risk and fear emerged as part of the research topic, because they arise from violence and affect experiences of citizenship. But they also act as a methodological constraint, affecting research quality and the potential for social action. More than this, they are also a characteristic of the researchers' own daily experience, working and living in violent places and interacting with violent actors. This briefing note focuses on this last dimension.

1 Briefing note

A well-known cartoon depicts Rio de Janeiro's iconic statue of Christ with his hands over his eyes instead of arms outstretched, to block out the sight of a city drenched in blood. I lived for over three years in Rio de Janeiro and have visited regularly over the past eight to conduct research, including that on violence and citizenship described in more detail elsewhere in this *IDS Bulletin*. Rio is marked by extreme violence, partly through publicised acts of brutality, and partly by the numerous acts of violence which do not garner any public attention but which dramatically affect people's lives. Together these generate a constant underlying fear, which pervades people's daily lives to different degrees and in different ways. While the middle class fears robbery or assault, residents of *favelas* fear death, torture, rape or prison (Caldeira 1999).

While it is possible to temporarily forget about violence in the face of Rio's hypnotic beauty and absorbing culture, conducting participatory research on the topic of violence there forced me to directly confront my own assumptions about danger and my own fears about the risks I took. The research process also engendered risks for the community researchers and the community residents who participated. In some respects, these risks overlapped with my own, while in others they were distinctive in character and dimension. Risk and fear emerged as part of the

research topic, because they arise from violence and affect experiences of citizenship. They also act as a methodological constraint, because they affect research quality and the potential for social action to ensue from this research process, through limiting access, data validity, and participation (Nordstrom and Robben 1996). But fear and risk were also a characteristic of daily experience for me, and for the other researchers and the participants, because of working and living in violent places and interacting with violent actors. This piece focuses on this last dimension.

2 Risks as an external researcher

Each day I worked in Quitungo and Guaporé, a *favela* and housing estate in the North Zone, an hour and a half's journey from my flat in a middle class neighbourhood of the city, near the sea. I travelled against the flow of the commuter rush, on increasingly precarious transportation. As I got closer to the North Zone and Quitungo and Guaporé, I would begin to hear gunshots, see police cars bristling with weapons, and squeeze into unregulated and illegal *kombis*, small decrepit vans that supplement the more expensive city buses that would frequently deviate from their routes to avoid police raids or robberies. The newspapers I often read during my journey usually included at least one story about killings and deaths in the North Zone, the growing power of the militia, and images of police invading *favelas*.

This physical journey paralleled a mental journey – to shift into a particular mode of interaction with the community researchers and residents, who live in a context radically different from the one I left behind every morning. I was confronting only a fraction of the unpredictability and risk that they experience all the time. And yet, this was a difficult transition for me to make daily. In contrast to my time at home in the evenings, I faced significantly greater risks during my time in the *favela*, and I experienced these more keenly because of the nature of the research. Participatory research implies a strong degree of empathy from the researcher towards the researched, so I could not ignore the dimension of risk that violence brought to the *favela* nor how the research project in some senses exacerbated it. Additionally, I felt a personal and professional obligation to respond to the tales of human suffering that constituted my data. I could arrive in the *favela* to learn that 25 people had been killed in the next community overnight during a militia raid. Everyone I worked with had lost at least one person close to them through violence. Working out how to respond to this in a sensitive way, without becoming overwhelmed by fear myself, was a daily challenge. My particular identity and positionality also affected risk, both for myself and for my co-researchers. As a white, female professional outsider from a foreign country, I enjoyed a certain amount of protection. But I also attracted more attention to our work (see Wheeler, this *IDS Bulletin*, Note on ‘Negotiating Access...’).

It is difficult to gauge what level of risk I faced as a researcher. My own perception of risk varied during the research process. Certain risks were predictable and thus to some extent manageable. Faced with the risk that the militia or drug trafficking faction would perceive the research as a threat and ban me from the community or harm me as a result, I sought to work closely with community researchers and carefully negotiate our access arrangements with traffickers and militia. A greater source of fear for me (as for those living in *favelas*) were the unpredictable risks. In my case, these were diverse: the possibility of being caught up and accidentally shot in a gun battle between police, militia and drug trafficking factions; the potential for changes in which faction controlled the community, which would lead to the research

being suspended; and the threat of being robbed. Mitigating actions reduce risk and fear but do nothing to diminish the fundamental capriciousness of violence.

3 Risks for community researchers and research participants

The research participants and the community researchers, through their involvement in the research, also faced risks beyond those they normally faced. For researchers, these included the risk that a negative portrayal of the militia or faction would lead to their local organisations and activities being shut down in reprisal, physical harm to themselves or their families, or forced exile from the community. For participants, the risk of harm or exile also existed, but to a lesser degree than for researchers, who were publicly associated with the research and could be held responsible for it. Community researchers assessed risks constantly, deciding which topics to discuss and how these discussions occurred. This was particularly sensitive during the negotiations with the militia and the drug traffickers for permission to carry out the research (see Wheeler, this *IDS Bulletin*, Note on ‘Negotiating Access...’). The research project itself was a direct threat to these actors, because it questioned their legitimacy and tried to encourage participatory social action as the pathway for reducing violence. The community researchers insisted on wearing a uniform. They printed T-shirts with the Citizenship DRC logo in English, and identity cards with their names, pictures and logo. This was one way that they sought to reduce their risk: by giving a formality to the work and clearly showing their links to a foreign organisation.

Within these communities there is a context of fear built up over time through a whole series of events that have degraded the social fabric. This context had direct implications for the research. Many people (including the community researchers) were reluctant to go through the pain of remembering and recounting experiences of violence. Fear stilted the environment for discussions during the participatory discussion groups and other activities. A participatory process may help to open opportunities to discuss some of these fears, but the circumstances that have generated fear stretch over years, limiting what can be achieved in a few months of research, however participatory. Also, perversely, the more participatory the research process, the more

these dynamics are likely to be uncovered and can interfere. Anonymous interviewing conducted in private is a setting in which interviewees can probably keep their feelings under wraps more readily than in a participatory process where inter-researcher rapport and closeness are built up over time through the sharing of common experience.

Life in the *favela* is governed by a set of rules, unwritten but clearly understood by residents, about what people are allowed to do and say in relation to the drug trafficking factions and the militias. I have learnt these rules over time. They entail not talking openly or publicly about the militia or faction, especially not to outsiders or the media. For transgressors, the consequences can be dire: informants have been tortured and killed. Hence the importance of community researchers deciding how to discuss violence; they are best placed to negotiate these rules and reduce risk to themselves and other participants, and by extension to me. The degree to which they and participants felt comfortable with the process determined levels of participation, which was thus a proxy for the predictable risks generated by the research.

References

Caldeira, Teresa (1999) 'Fortified Enclaves: The New Urban Segregation', in James Holston (ed.), *Cities and Citizenship*, Durham: Duke University Press

For me as an outsider, each day involved confronting my fears and recognising the fear and risk faced by residents. The research was a process of coming to terms with violence as part of the fabric of daily life, while also recognising that violence does not totally limit or inform all possibilities for action. A co-researcher and NGO leader (from a middle-class neighbourhood) expressed the somewhat flippant and stoic attitude of those wholly accustomed to this mode of life: 'Being mugged or robbed is not violence – it's just the redistribution of resources. Real violence is getting shot or something' (Wheeler fieldnotes, 25 February 2007). In the face of overwhelming but episodic violence and brutality, I learned to at least partially submerge my own fears, helped by empathy and engagement with those living in the *favelas*, who faced state-sponsored violence in addition to the violence of the drug trade on a daily basis. The research itself, as well as causing risks, offered ways to diminish risk, but not fear. It is important to recognise that engaged and participatory research on violence is not without a personal and emotional cost, both for the researchers, and for those who participate.

Nordstrom, C. and Robben, A. (1996) *Fieldwork Under Fire: Contemporary Studies of Violence and Survival*, Berkeley: University of California

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