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Research Note:

Don't Just Pay It Back, Pay It Forward: From Accountability to Reciprocity in Research Relationships

Megan Ybarra

Department of Geography, University of Washington
Box 353550, Smith Hall 408, Seattle
Washington 98195, UNITED STATES
mybarra@uw.edu

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1. Introduction

My least favorite topic of discussion when conducting fieldwork in rural Guatemala is unfortunately a very popular one. At the same time, it is a topic that is sensitive enough that my friends wait until we have drunk enough *b'oj* (sugarcane liquor) that they feel comfortable talking about what is on their minds, not the meeting agenda. On one occasion, my friends and I were on our way back from a meeting in town. I found myself leaning against the counter of a dusty road-side store with a few men in their twenties, when one leaned forward and said, "So, tell me, what do *gringos* really think about Guatemalans?" (*gringo* is the Latin American term for a person from the US, although this is often employed for any foreigner who appears to be of European descent; as Nelson [1999] details, the term can be dismissive, offensive, and/or affectionate). I tried without success to beg off, finally sighing and looking him in the eyes as I said, "They don't." While my companions laughed, then frowned, I explained that Guatemala is

rarely in the news in the US, and many *gringos* think my research is in “South America.” When he protested that there were many Guatemalans working in the US, I took a deep breath and explained that it is surprisingly easy for *gringos* to look past the reality of undocumented migrants as human beings and most *gringos* imagine immigrants as caramel-colored, Spanish-speaking Mexicans, not indigenous, Q’eqchi’-speaking Guatemalans.

As the editors of this special issue have signaled, researchers who conduct fieldwork in developing countries often feel obligated to “give back” to the communities who make their research possible. Colleagues and friends (in both the US and Guatemala) regularly assume that I am connected to my research through family ties because I have a Hispanic surname. In graduate school, classmates would sometimes assert that I had grown up speaking Spanish and had family ties in Guatemala, as though to claim that my research was more due to my ethnic identity than my labor and community engagement. More importantly, they implied that I maintain long-term relationships with Guatemalan communities because they dovetail with family travel. I raise the point to largely dismiss it—to the best of my knowledge, I have no relatives in Guatemala. Instead, I want to think about the tensions around the *gringo* mindset, real and imagined, and how I struggle to overcome it.

Feminist methodological perspectives have called attention to power dynamics in research relationships, particularly critiquing the extractive nature of a parachuting researcher who treats human beings as “data points” or “subjects” (Gluck & Patai, 1991; Wolf, 1996). Pulido (2008) identifies two key aspects of long-term relationships for researchers working with communities in social justice struggles: *accountability*, which I think of as paying it back, and *reciprocity*, which I think of as paying it forward. Ethical research demands both elements, in ways small and large, for years that may stretch beyond the bounds of any single research project.

2. Accountability, or Paying it Back

First, let me acknowledge that accountability is important. When I lived in rural Q’eqchi’ communities, I regularly wrote letters and grant applications, took pictures of everything from evidence of violent threats made with gun in hand to children’s birthday parties (leaving developed photographs and CDs with picture files), and attended political meetings with digital video recorder in hand as a representative of the international human rights community when necessary. These small acts are clearly insufficient to “pay back” a community of people who open their lives up to a researcher as a new friend. Perhaps equally important is the recognition that my individual attention—as a *gringa*—offers.

At the end of Guatemala’s internal conflict in 1996, as part of the Peace Accords, the Guatemalan government had officially recognized 21 Maya peoples, including the Q’eqchi’. Since then, the *gringo*-Maya relationship has been one of pastoral care. *Gringo* visitors to Guatemala learn from guidebooks that the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) supported a small invasion and coup in 1954, then backed the military for 30 years,

“propelling the country into a spiral of violence and economic decline” (Stewart, 2009, p. 405f). As we learn about the heights of violence, in which the military and paramilitaries killed over 100,000 people—mostly Maya—in counterinsurgency against fewer than 5,000 Marxist revolutionaries (Ball, Kobrak, & Spierer, 1999; CEH, 1999), *gringos* know that we bear some of the blame. When the violence finally slowed into a protracted lull, the United Nations brokered peace accords, including a promised USD 1.9 billion for a country the size of Tennessee.

Perhaps to partially compensate for the international community’s inaction in the face of genocide, aid organizations have focused their funding and energies on Maya communities. Although many leaders in the national Pan-Maya movement are wary of *gringo* appropriation (Warren, 1998), in rural areas it is much more common for Ladinos (i.e., non-indigenous persons) to bemoan their exclusion from Mayan-targeted funding (Hale, 2006). Rural communities tried to catch the tidal wave of aid that followed, often claiming that they were “abandoned” (*abandonados*) by the state. Discourses of abandonment play both political and affective roles, which I describe below.

When Q’eqchi’ Maya community leaders dictate requests for projects to me that assert that they have been abandoned, they are making two political-historical claims. Most communities had a relationship with a nearby plantation owner, in which they would act as reserve labor for export crops, such as coffee or cardamom. While these relationships were laden with power inequalities, leaders use the notion of abandonment to recall paternalism as a form of social insurance, when the *patrón* (plantation owner) acted as godfather to their children and took responsibility for their welfare, often loaning money for medical bills with no expectation of repayment. While this paternalism was exploitative, communities knew that they could call on the *patrón* in an emergency. In the post-war era of neoliberal development and entrepreneurship, the discourse of abandonment calls attention to the ways that transnational corporations, like Halliburton and Olmeca, invest in African oil palm without buying into a long-term relationship with their workers.

Second, community leaders use the discourse of abandonment to place themselves outside war-time (1960-1996) politics. The notion of abandonment feeds into stereotypes of traditional indigenous communities as isolated, thus enabling the *gringo*-Maya relationship to bloom without acknowledging messy histories of imperialistic intervention, military repression, and paramilitary participation. Most national and international political projects are predicated on the idea that Maya communities were either victims or perpetrators—most people I had the privilege of working with are survivors, which means they have lived on both sides of the binary. Rather than explain how this is possible to an outsider (when some can scarcely believe it themselves), it is safer to leave the complications of living through war unsaid. Thus, in the absence of a welfare state or a caring local elite (*patrón*), rural Maya communities call on *gringos* to rescue them from abandonment.

Whether laughing as we drink, or crying as they clutch my wrist, my Maya interlocutors personally call on me not to abandon them. I have found that it is not a steady presence

over months that will convince people that I have not abandoned them, but the act of leaving and then returning. After 2 years in the Peace Corps, I left the town of Uspantán to attend graduate school, telling everyone I would return when the school-year was over. The next summer, I stopped in to visit some friends during my first field research trip. When I popped my head into a meeting, I was taken aback at the number of people who remembered me (I did not bring enough gifts), and the shock with which they greeted me. One friend shook her head, saying, “It’s a miracle that you have come back.” When I protested that it had barely been a year, and I had promised to return, her response was stunning in its simplicity: “Yes, but everyone says they will come back.” It went without saying that most *gringos* do not return, regardless of what they promise when they leave.

More upsetting was my close friend, Bernardo, who never once admonished me not to abandon him. It was not until 3 years after we concluded our fieldwork (during which I lived in his house and he assisted with Spanish/Q’eqchi’ interpretation in interviews), when I stopped by on my way to a conference to give him a biannual payment for his daughter’s schooling, that I realized the extent to which this obligation was built into our relationship. We patted each other on the shoulder and it seemed a little too emotional, so I asked him what was wrong. “Lupe [his wife] was afraid that you would abandon us, but I told her you would not forget,” he replied. While I chided him for worrying, since I had never missed a payment or left a text unanswered, I realized that remembering my relationships and my promises was how he needed me to honor our research. Our research together ended 6 years ago, but I am still striving to “pay it back” as a matter of accountability.

The discourse of abandonment expresses the fear that *gringos* will leave, forget, and fail to return. On some level, Guatemalans know that their experiences do not fill the hearts of *gringos*, which is why they struggle to capture our attention. Some of the most heart-wrenching interviews I conducted were with massacre survivors in Bernardo’s village. I clearly remember offering to stop one interview, less because the political activist and genocide survivor herself was upset and more because I could not stop crying. She admonished me not to stop, not to turn away, and not to stop writing, because she wanted *gringos* to know her history. More than that, she asked me to recognize her struggle.

3. Reciprocity, or Paying it Forward

As difficult as accountability may be, there is an element of simplicity to it in my work: I respond to texts, I send money to help pay a young woman’s school bills, I listen to stories that people want me to hear. When women tell me they are embarrassed to be illiterate, I demonstrate my shocking inability to make a proper tortilla (no matter how many times they show me). I consider this little more than basic recognition of the people who share a slice of their life with me in the name of research, for a book they will never read. The greater challenge is how to reciprocate, or use research as oppositional work that supports social justice change.

It is here that I want to take on Pulido’s bold admonition: “academics often rationalize that they are providing an important service simply by telling the story of a subordinated

or otherwise marginalized group” (2008, p. 351). The telling of stories takes different forms—some useful, some not. In my case, I believe that I have found ways to tell the story of massacre survivors’ contemporary struggles that are a kind of reciprocity. First, I note that Q’eqchi’s have the highest rates of monolingualism and the lowest literacy rates amongst Guatemala’s 21 Maya peoples. Thus, when I submit reports based on my ethnography to state and non-state agencies, the fact that these reports are in Spanish, written down, and have a university logo on the cover page makes them useful to bring visibility and legitimacy to the political struggles they support. For example, the genocide survivor above needed documentation for her claims for compensation, more than 25 years after the massacre. My ethnography is one piece of documentation that the community is presenting to the state compensation agency. Second, I agree that presenting my work at academic conferences in the US is a service only to my career. When I give presentations at Guatemalan universities or at conferences with Guatemalan policymakers and academics, however, I am engaging in dialog with decision-makers who are often directly relevant to my friends’ political struggles. I use my status as a foreign woman with a PhD, and the veneer of authority it affords, to nudge policymakers towards lived realities that they otherwise might not confront.

Finally, I live in the US, so I must continue to use a broader interpretation of reciprocity that allows me to pay it forward, acknowledging that some of my work will never benefit the people who shared their lives with me. In paying it forward, I strive to practice ethical research and use my status to work with others who are similarly marginalized in the community I live in.

It turns out that even those pesky English-only journal articles buried behind a pay-wall can serve an important purpose. I was delighted when my friend and colleague, Norman Schwartz told me that one of my articles was entered as evidence in a hearing for a Guatemalan seeking asylum. Across the US, judges can consider academic scholarship when they seek to understand the relevance of war-time violence to present-day threats, as well as political aspects of *feminicidio* (targeted killing of women and using their corpses as public spectacles) and gang violence. While explaining the articulation of conservation, race, and violence behind a pay-wall seems like a conversation with very few people, some of those people are important decision-makers.

More recently, I have had the opportunity to talk with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) judges as an expert witness in deportation and removal hearings. These are not criminal hearings, which means that judges can interrupt and ask questions as they see fit. On the stand, I have explained some crucial points of history, geography, and ethnicity as they relate to politics. While immigrants seeking asylum must tell their own story, my job is to place their testimony within a broader context and explain what might happen if s/he is deported. I am often troubled by how little background knowledge ICE judges have about Guatemala and Mexico, but I am just as often impressed with how incisive and useful their questions are. I do not know any of the families that I have testified for, but I consider my affidavits and testimony a broader kind of reciprocity.

When I decided to conduct research in Guatemala, I thought the rural fieldwork experience would help me better understand the politics of land, longing, and racism. While I think I do better understand these entangled phenomena, I underestimated the reach of my research into my life. Instead of a single experience that can be dismissed with a tidy instance of giving back, my friends text, e-mail, call, and Facebook me asking, when are you coming back? With the generosity—and reminders—of my friends, I recognize myself as part of a community in struggle (Pulido, 2008, p. 351). I may sometimes fall short, but I understand my support for their struggles as central to my vocation. At the same time, I try to engage in storytelling that acts as political reciprocity. When done right, storytelling can both serve as a tool for communities to demand legal recognition, and as a way to connect broader webs of communities in their common struggles for political change.

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