

Beginner's luck: Lessons learned from a Novice Social Researcher's Journey in her Fieldwork on Criminal Careers



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This article reports on findings and lessons learned from fieldwork that was initially conducted to gather data for a master's thesis. This article reflects on narratives relevant to the topic of criminal careers, and lessons learned in the social research field. The source of data utilized in this article is an interview with a self-proclaimed Mexican Paise ex-human smuggler and ex-drug dealer and his friend, a self-proclaimed male Chicano and ex-drug dealer. The aim is to answer the simple question: What can we learn from this conversion? This question is intended to be quite general, because the aims are twofold: on the one hand the aim is to share what has been learned from the subjects; on the other hand, the goal is to share what has been learned as a novice social researcher in the field. The initial purpose of the interview was to gather information on criminal careers, migration issues, and identity. Three themes were derived from the interview: a) gang activity, b) human smuggling and border crossing c) cops and prison incarceration. The findings report that violence was a dominant concept present in the discourse, while at the same time a sense of morality comes to surface on occasion. Limitation and lessons learned in the field were also found to be relevant to report.

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Introduction

The summer of 2007 marked the start of a journey into an invisible world; a world of the undocumented, trafficked human beings, human smugglers and smuggled humans, drug dealers, gang members, and prisoners. The aim of my fieldwork was to conduct narrative interviews. It was just the end of my undergraduate career, and the start of my masters level studies in sociology at Åbo Akademi University in Finland. A fresh mind, and perhaps a childlike need to tackle social problems, I decided to conduct some fieldwork during what was meant to be my vacation back home in Kern county California.

Special thanks: I would like to thank my parents and brother for always encouraging me to ask questions, my grandmother Grant for her love and wisdom, and my husband for supporting me in my journey to pursue my passion. I would also like to thank Mikko Lagerspetz, Professor of Sociology at Åbo Akademi University, for his support during my rookie sociology years.

I stepped into the field considering the aim of classical sociology, which was to focus on social problems of the given time and context, and to give recommendations on how to tackle them (Sydie 2007). This general, and perhaps rather simple, understanding of sociology was the driving force behind my novice fieldwork. Social problems in American society are manifold, but I wanted to address the issues against the background of my youth.

I dove into the societal problems I grew up around. Why? Inspired by the sociologist C. Wright Mills, I sought to explore my sociological imagination and test my own 'intellectual craftsmanship'. Mills described social science as the practice of a craft (Mills 1959, 195). Mills challenged the social scientist to utilize their intellectual craftsmanship; that is, to "learn to use your life experience in your intellectual work" and continually "examine and interpret it" (ibid., 196).

I was ready to go home and challenge what I had learned in my studies in sociology. But once

my fieldwork was over and upon return to Finland, I struggled to follow Mills' (ibid.) social science guidelines of capturing what I experienced and sorting it out. Mills (ibid.) explained that "only in this way can you hope to use it to guide and test your reflection, and in the process shape your intellectual craftsmanship". What I discovered was emotionally overwhelming at times, and my notes, and interviews were shoved away in my files. I found myself frozen in a deep thought process that has lasted for many years. Returning back to Åbo Akademi University, I remember sitting with my professor, trying to make sense of what I experienced. I did not know how to handle what I learned, or put it in writing. Fieldwork that I thought might be utilized for a master's thesis got pushed aside. Little did I know, I would continue to return to this fieldwork for several years, continuously reflecting on it, and adding to it, essentially keeping my "inner world awake" (1959, 197) as Mills would say.

Having set this work aside for some time, I have subconsciously and at times intentionally approached my experiences by way of a self-reflective process, a process suggested by Mills. Although topics of identity, crime and immigration—all separate issues, and at times connected—have been in public discourse, across borders, for centuries, it seems a good time to pull out my dusty files and dare to report on my novice journey in the field.

Background and Method

The focus of this article is a reflection and report on an interview with two subjects: a self-proclaimed male Mexican Paise, ex-human smuggler and ex-drug dealer, and his friend, a self-proclaimed male Chicano and ex-drug dealer. For the purpose of this article, the aim of this study is to answer the simple question: What can we learn from this conversation? This question is quite open, because the aims are twofold. On the one hand the aim is to share what has been learned from the subjects; on the other hand, it is important to share what has been learned as a researcher in the field. But before answering or at least reflecting on the key question, it is pertinent to spell out my motivations as the interviewer and reporter.

The initial purpose of the interview was to explore sociological problems of *criminal career, mi-*

gration issues, and identity. I sought to learn who these men were, what they did for a living, and how they perceived their experiences during their criminal activities. I did not want to step into the field with too many preconceived notions, or prejudices; instead I sought to learn from the subjects in a raw, unscripted sense. My aim was to learn about subjects' identities and experiences.

It is important to note that the interview discussed in this article was conducted in a conversational approach, and not a formal interview with pre-existing questions. I needed to take a casual stance in light of the social context because the social situation demanded informality. What is also important to report is my "affiliation" with the subjects; how did I learn about these two participants of my research? Simple answer. They lived in the neighborhood where I was residing during my summer vacation. They engaged in gang activity, an activity hard to go unnoticed if it is happening next door. Both of the subjects asked to be anonymous, therefore, I will use pseudonyms. The interviewees will be identified as mentioned **A** and **B**. **A** is the dominant voice of the two, and **B** only entered the dialogue occasionally. From my observations, it almost seemed like B was a bodyguard of **A**. Furthermore, the conversation was lengthy, and therefore I will only be reporting on the key themes drawn from the data, as well as what I learned from this experience:

1. Gang activity
2. Human smuggling and border crossing
3. Cops and Prison incarceration.

This article is in-depth and qualitative, and thus, no generalizations will be claimed. While in-depth interviews are fruitful and relevant across disciplines there are limitations. The limitations will be addressed in the closing remarks. What is quite interesting about the conversation that will be reported on, in the following sections, is that while we can look at each theme as separate and equally enlightening, the themes can simultaneously be interpreted as interwoven. In the *literature Criminal Justice, Law Enforcement and Corrections : Organized Crime in the U.S.*, Wesley Knowles (2010, 45) reports that different types of organized crime can be interconnected; for example in the case of Hong Kong, Knowles reported that "the leading organized crime problems in Hong Kong are car theft and smuggling, human smuggling, cross-border organ-

ized crime involving China and Macau, money laundering, drug trafficking, debt collection, and triad monopolies.”

My data collection includes the topic of gang activity, which is shaped by a complex social system. It exists both inside and outside of prison. Prison gangs are known for violence and racism on the one hand, and as a means for providing protection on the other (Skarbek 2012). In the context of California, prison gangs are notorious for the strong force behind the “inmate social systems” (Ibid. 2012, 96). The conversation reflected on in this article, will provide a glimpse at this complex social system. The data also involves discussion on violence. There are different categories of criminal violence, for example, homicide, assault, robbery, and rape; and behind each violent act involves various motivations (Jacquin 2007).

The Conversation

“I take care of my own business.” (A): Gang Activity

It was an extremely hot day in Kern County, California on the sixth of July 2007. I recorded the temperature in my field notes as 111 degrees Fahrenheit. The heat wave was so extreme that I suffered a heat stroke. After the interview, my grandmother brought over a bag of salty Frito chips and a bottle of Gatorade to remedy my affliction. The heat was not the only cause of my abnormal sweating on the sixth. Standing in a front yard where gang violence had just occurred a couple days prior probably added to it.

A began talking about an incident with a rival gang that happened on the fourth of July, American independence day, just two days prior to our conversation. What happened? I asked, worriedly. According to **A**, some members of a rival gang came and violently attacked him in his front yard; the same spot that I was standing. He was not the only one attacked, his pregnant girlfriend, and his friend **B** as well. His girlfriend was hurt very badly and bleeding, **A** explained, but she was too scared to make a police report. **A**—somewhat proudly—stated that he took matters in his own hands. He stated that he went and attacked the guy who assaulted his girlfriend. The cops were called on him, and he was arrested for fighting and possession of a gun.

On the 13th of July, he reported that he would be serving 90 days in jail.

Reporting to the police has unspoken implications; **A** explained that there would be consequences if he would “snitch” on the rival gang members. Once he is in jail, **A** stated, everyone will know if he snitched or not. “I take care of my own business. And I never give names to no one,” yelled out **A**. It was as if he wanted the whole neighborhood to hear him. Following his declaration, he added some curse words; however, this was the only time profanity was used during the conversation, as **A** apologized to me immediately.

At this point **B** noticed my evident discomfort and brought out a chair for me. My nerves were getting the best of me; not only that, my clothes were becoming drenched in sweat. But all of us were suffering from the heat. Standing in the front yard of **A**’s home, I felt myself tense up when a low-rider car crept slowly passed us. The driver stared at us with his window rolled down, booming rap music in the background, then sped off. Indeed, sitting in this social situation highlights my naivety as a young academic. “Can they hear my heart beating?” I wrote in my field notes. Note to self: “Do not interview gang members in their front yard where drive by shootings are not uncommon.” After this particular interview, I tried to choose better and safer settings for my other interviews.

“The cops in Guatemala killed my friend.” (A): Human smuggling and border crossing

A explained that the town has one big gang with inner rivalry; a nearby larger city, about 25 miles south, has at least 20 different gangs. He stressed that, outside of his prison time, he did not engage in any gang violence when he was living in Los Angeles for ten years. His violent activities only came to surface once he moved to Kern County.

A was born in Mexico and did not want to talk about his childhood. When asked what he was doing in southern California, he explained that in 1988, at age 14, he began working for coyotes. The coyotes that he worked for were in their twenties. “What did you do during your work with coyotes?” I asked. “I would buy eight illegal immigrants at a time,” **A** explained. Interesting word choice. What did he mean by ‘buy’? **A** stated that each immigrant costs 30 U.S. dollars. He would start by stealing

4-runner sports utility vehicles, and pick up the immigrants in San Diego, near the Mexican border. He would then take them to a hotel in Oceanside, and wait for a call from a coyote. What was the call about? The coyote would inform him of whether the checkpoint between San Diego and Los Angeles had flowing traffic or not. According to **A**, the Border Patrol stops cars at the checkpoint in search for illegal immigrants, while other times they just let the traffic flow. When he was informed of flowing traffic, he would drive the immigrants through the checkpoint and collect 700 U.S. dollars per person. After the mission was accomplished, he would “dump” the car at Vons grocery store. This activity would go on for three years.

A stated that he was “good with cars”, so he worked for a Guatemalan coyote for one year. He described this year as a stressful one, with more pressure than the previous job. **A** seemed to take pride in his skills, stating that he was “perfect for the job.” What was this job? His job was to steal cars and drive them down to Guatemala. He described this task as being more complicated than his previous job. After stealing a car from California, he would change the key switch to the engine and the doors. He would go to a car dealership and buy the switches and change them within two hours. At midnight, he would steal a license plate from a similar car, and switch them. That way, if a cop would check the license plate it would not come up as stolen. After changing the license plate, he would buy a fake pink slip for 20 U.S. dollars, and fill them out.¹ Then he would head south to the Mexican border, and drive all the way down to Guatemala.

While explaining this process, **A**’s emotions shifted from pride to sadness. He explains:

The cops in Guatemala killed my friend. They shot my friend’s dad in the leg, and his brother in the arm... Right in front of me. (A)

After this incident, **A** decided to change careers.

“They’ll be killed... those people don’t deserve to live.” (B): Cops and Prison incarceration

Both **A** and **B** had experience in prison- both for selling drugs. **A** stressed the importance of identity, claiming that he was a Paisa. He described this identity as not necessarily being inherent to one gang, i.e. as an official member of a specific gang, but rather an identity that one can carry in affilia-

tion with multiple gangs. “That way [once in prison] you already belong to a group and will be much more protected,” **A** explained. Some of the gangs that the Paisa identity is attributed to, according to both interviewees, are: “Fifth and Hills” in downtown Los Angeles, and the Sinaloa, Michoacán, and Baja Cali (BC) gangs. **B** added to the identity discussion by giving examples of the type of identities one does not want to have when entering prison; i.e. molester, or rapist. According to **A**, child molesters have to be placed in a separate facility. What happens if they are released in the general population of a prison?

A: “The guard might tell just one inmate, but the word spreads like wildfire.”

B: “They’ll be killed. We all have mothers, sisters, and children. Those people don’t deserve to live.

A: “The only people that don’t kill rapists are the African American inmates.”

The conversation topic shifted to cops. According to **B**, the cops tried to frame him for possession of drugs. He admitted that he was selling drugs at the time. But at the time of his arrest he claimed that he did not have any drugs on him. What happened? He was driving home with his former girlfriend and he noticed cops waiting for him in his front yard. He decided to try to get away through the alley behind his house. However, he was immediately cornered. “Even though I was a drug dealer, I had absolutely no drugs on me” (**B**). **B** stated that one of the cops pulled a bag of drugs from his own pocket. The cop placed the drugs on top of the cop car and declared that he found drugs. **B** was arrested immediately and he described the discomfort of the handcuffs:

“The handcuffs were put on very tight. I tried to tell the cops but they wouldn’t adjust them. Two of my fingers on my left hand don’t have any feeling in them now.” (B)

B added that he went to court about being framed, and he won. At the end of the court case, the cop that arrested him told him that he would get him eventually. He stressed that he does not sell drugs anymore, and he is trying to stay clean. Even though cops pull him over “all the time” and search him and his vehicle, he says he is always clean. “But the drug problem is getting worse here by the minute” (**B**).

A had spent three years in prison for selling drugs, and described the riots against the African American

inmates who were members of the Crips and Bloods gangs. He explained that the Southsiders (Surenos), Paisas, and whites will team up together during a riot, while the Northerners (rivals of the Surenos) will team up with the African Americans. The other “gangs” from India, Armenia and Iraq tend to stay to themselves and do not take sides, and no one helps them out if they are in need. **B** agreed with **A** on the importance of group affiliation in prison. How do people protect themselves in prison?

A: “We make weapons in prison.”

B: “You can make knives out of steal bars, chain linked fences, and newspaper.”

A: “You have to use water and toothpaste.”

B: “Razors.”

A pointed out his prison scars. He stated that he was attacked many times by African American inmates, and has multiple scars to prove it. I observed one of the scars, which started near his left eyebrow and went across his forehead and up passed his hairline. He had multiple scars on his body from what he described as “bloody prison fights”. Amid our focus on battle wounds and weapon making, **A** kindly asked if I needed anything to drink.

“I know I’m paying now.” Low emotions, high heat

B could no longer cope with the heat, and retreated to **A**’s air conditioned home. Talking about the memories took over **A**’s emotions, and he started crying. While trying to fight back his tears he lit a cigarette, and took a couple puffs. “I know I’m paying now,” he said. He vowed that he will always pay for the bad things he has done in his life. He stated, “I regret everything I have done.” Suddenly our conversation ended when a car pulled up across the street. Although the interviewees described criminal behavior and at times violent experiences, **A**’s tears showed that he has gone through pain, and regret. I couldn’t help but take my interviewer mask off and become an emotional being in front him; after all, I was a novice researcher. I told him it is never too late to change for the better, and in return he wiped away his tears, shook my hand and thanked me for actually wanting to know his story. I was not able to thank the interviewee’s friend who retreated to the air-conditioned house.

It seemed **A** had some business to tend to. I looked over and standing on the porch was **A**’s

pregnant girlfriend, smoking a cigarette. Her face was bruised; perhaps from the gang attack. She appeared to be sad. I observed **A** crossing the street to speak to the individual in the car. I walked away in my sweat-drenched clothing and could not help but think that the emotions seemed to be very low in that high summer heat.

Closing Remarks

This article reflected on narratives relevant to the topic of criminal careers, and lessons learned in the social research field as a novice social researcher in 2007. An interview with a self-proclaimed Mexican Paisa ex-human smuggler and ex-drug dealer and his friend, a self-proclaimed male Chicano and ex-drug dealer is the primary source of data utilized in this article. The aim was to answer the simple question: What can we learn from this conversation? The initial purpose of the interview was to discuss criminal career, migration issues, and identity. Three themes were derived from the data and reported on: a) gang activity, b) human smuggling and border crossing c) cops and prison incarceration. Violence was a dominant concept present in the discourse, while at the same time a sense of morality comes to surface on occasion. In the closing remarks, I report on the limitations, findings of the research, and the lessons learned as a new social researcher in the field.

Limitations

At the conclusion of the conversation, I was left pondering on all the discussions surrounding violence. My own interests were not revolving around the concept of violence at that time. Our conversation began with discussion on violence, and ended with a glimpse of some of the consequences of violence, both physical and emotional; for example, the physical being the bruises on **A**’s pregnant girlfriend’s face, and the scars on **A**’s body, and the emotional layers of regret. A conversation which was meant to focus on the subjects’ jobs –i.e. in relation to their criminal behavior and identity transitioned inadvertently to varied elements of violence.

An evident limitation is the neglect of a holistic understanding of the subjects’ biography from childhood to the time of the interview. Thus, any claims of causes or relationships cannot be deter-

mined. Another limitation here is that generalizations on the themes a) gang activity, b) human smuggling and border crossing, c) and cops and prison incarceration, cannot be made. Also, the stories told by the interviewees' cannot be taken as absolute truth; that said, absolute truth was not the aim of the open-ended interview. Moreover, after learning about the significance of violence, which became apparent during the analysis process, there are some questions which can not be answered; for example, what may have been the cause of **A's** and **B's** legitimization of their criminal activity as a means of 'economic stability'? What could have contributed to their 'openness' in engaging in violent activities? As a junior researcher, I was not prepared to ask questions that were able to answer such questions; these questions only came to surface after the conversational opportunity took place. Thus, it is relevant and interesting to dig deeper in such problems in future interviews with similar subjects. As the aim of classical sociology was to focus on social problems of the given time and context, and to give recommendations on how to tackle them (Sydie 2007), the only justice I can do to this classical aim is to recommend that continued fieldwork is conducted in order to gather more in-depth data on this complex subject in order to contribute to policy, crime prevention, and social knowledge.

Findings and Lessons Learned

Although this is an interview with only two subjects, there are some lessons that can be derived from the conversation. Our conversation was seemingly dominated by discourse on the concept of violence; however, perplexingly, a sense of ethics or morals sprouted amid the violent talk. At first I was nervous to be around the interviewees, especially since a couple days prior to the interview, a rival gang attacked them in the very place I was standing; just two houses down from where I was staying during the whole duration my fieldwork. However, their openness to speak and evident concern about my comfort put my nerves at ease.

A's immediate regret for using foul language was one sign of his 'moral' being. **B's** concern for my comfort in the midst of the summer heat was an example of his character. What was compelling was their division of what is right and what is wrong

in terms of crime and violence. On the one hand, it was acceptable to make weapons in prison, engage in gang violence, deal drugs, -although **B** did claim that he was doing his best to stay away from the drug world-, steal cars, smuggle or 'buy' humans illegally across the Mexican and American border, and so on. On the other hand, they both found it completely unacceptable to be a rapist or a child molester. Essentially, they deemed it appropriate to kill prisoners who were serving time for rape and child molestation. Moreover, **B** felt betrayed by the cops, claiming that they lied. While he admitted that he was a drug dealer at the time of his arrest, he found the cops' actions to be unjust – so much so that he took them to court and, according to him, won the case. **A's** tears and words of regret provided validation of his remorse related to his actions; that said, it does not provide an answer on whether or not he will stop his criminal behavior.

Furthermore, the interview gave interesting insight into the complexity of the following: group affiliation (e.g. gangs); step-by-step information on how some vehicles are stolen and some of the reasons why they are stolen (e.g. human smuggling); prison life (e.g. weapon making, identity, protection); and their perceptions on cops (e.g. 'unfair' treatment). Group affiliation was considered important in the light of prison incarceration, described as a means of protection, that is, protection against violence, as well as group participation in prison violence. Interestingly, the claim that no one helps the Iraqis, Indians and Armenians indicates that they will 'help' individuals in their groups, and I can only assume that 'help' can encompass both violent and nonviolent assistance.

The subjects' discussion on group affiliation reflects David Skarbek's (2012) study on prison gangs, norms and organizations. This also provides a glimpse into the different categories of violence (Jacquin 2007), described earlier in the article. **A** openly negotiated his own violent behavior and motivations such as group alliance, protection, and revenge. While at the same time he and **B** indirectly revealed violent acts that they do not claim to be a part of, such as child molestation and rape. Interestingly, he justified committing murder of an individual in prison if that individual is a known molester or rapist. This leads to questions on the prevention of violence. It is hoped that violence is minimized in society by way of incarceration and prevention and

rehabilitation services; however, the violence does not necessarily stop once incarceration occurs, violence manifests in new forms and justifications.

This article also reported on the complexity of migration, and how some manage to get away with crossing the Mexican American border. Once individuals have been smuggled across the border, there may be certain checkpoints where vehicles are stopped. **A** reported that checkpoints may not be in effect all the time. **A**'s description of the efforts with the coyotes, and individuals who are watching over the checkpoints and providing notification as to when the checkpoints are not in effect, show the complexity of the organized crime of human smuggling. Moreover, the transnational nature of theft was raised, when **A** described his experiences stealing vehicles in California and driving them down to Guatemala. Although it is one individual's account of vehicle theft, the detailed description on the actions taken to successfully get away with the theft was highly informative.

As a researcher, there are some lessons to be learned from this. One lesson that I find important to share is that during fieldwork, one should be open for change. What is meant by change is twofold: 1) one should be willing to adapt to the given social situation 2) one should be open to changing the research focus; i.e. depending on what is learned along the way, the focus may shift to themes that seem to dominate the field, and it is important to tune into those shifts. How the interview takes shape can provide fruitful entryways to knowledge that the researcher may find relevant for further exploration, even if that was not the initial intention. Essentially, this is what Mills (1959) argued, in that a social scientist should not just prepare a research plan solely for the purpose of funding, never to return to it again, but rather, a researcher should continuously revisit one's research plan and revise it.

Another lesson learned is to always analyze the social situation prior to collecting your data; e.g. try to understand the social scene, the type of individuals who may be present. It is imperative to anticipate all potential scenarios and safety issues. That way, you can avoid, the best you can, compromising your own safety. In my case, I placed myself in a fairly dangerous social setting. I realized this when I was conducting the interview, and without that experience I may have never truly understood why it is important to analyze the situation prior to data gathering.

This is just one fragment of my continued efforts to test my 'sociological imagination' and share my 'craft' (Mills, 1959) as a novice researcher back in 2007. While there are limitations in this fieldwork, I feel I owe it to students who are beginning their career in the social sciences. I hope this sparks a conversation about experiences in the field. Mills (1959, 195) wrote that "[o]nly conversations in which experienced thinkers exchange information about their actual ways of working can a useful sense of method and theory be imparted to the beginning student." Mills (ibid.) describes social science as a "practice of a craft". I agree with him, but I want to take it a step further, and challenge the junior scholar that conducts fieldwork, to openly share their experiences, mistakes, and accomplishments. One thing I learned is that my inexperience at that time made my fieldwork one of the most organic, raw, unrestrained social research that I have ever participated in. So, now I challenge the amateur academic to go out there, and learn what their own craft may be, and most importantly, do not wait as many years as I did to share it.

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Note

- ¹ A "pink slip" refers to a California Certificate of Title, which essentially is a transfer of ownership. (How to Change Vehicle Ownership, California Department of Motor Vehicles: https://www.dmv.ca.gov/portal/dmv/?1dmy&urile=wcm:path:/dmv_content_en/dmv/pubs/brochures/fast_facts/ffvr32#sign, Retrieved 6-9-2015).