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Electronic version

URL: <http://cal.revues.org/7158>

DOI: 10.4000/cal.7158

ISSN: 2268-4247

Publisher

Institut des hautes études de l'Amérique latine

Printed version

Date of publication: 31 January 2003

Number of pages: 69-80

ISBN: 2-970163-35-1

ISSN: 1141-7161

Electronic reference

Cecilia Menjívar, « Reflections from One Latino Field: Notes from Research Among Central Americans in the United States », *Cahiers des Amériques latines* [Online], 42 | 2003, Online since 09 August 2017, connection on 11 October 2017. URL : <http://cal.revues.org/7158> ; DOI : 10.4000/cal.7158



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REFLECTIONS FROM ONE LATINO FIELD : NOTES FROM RESEARCH AMONG CENTRAL AMERICANS IN THE UNITED STATES

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IN THIS PAPER I SHARE SOME REFLECTIONS about conducting fieldwork among Latin American immigrants in the United States. These observations are based on more than a decade of research in mostly Central American communities in different US cities, such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, Washington DC, and Phoenix. As a Central American immigrant myself and given the qualitative nature of my research, in each instance the interaction between my study participants and I has been central for the course of the research. Thus, given the significance of this interaction, it is important to note not only what was said, but also to whom and in what context. As Renato Rosaldo (1993 : 169) points out, « In discussing forms of social knowledge, both of analysts and of human actors, one must consider their social positions ». What are the complexities of the speaker's social identity? Does the person speak from a position of relative dominance or relative subordination?

My relations with my study participants have been undoubtedly shaped by the power dynamics between the researcher and the researched, as « the analyst's position depends, in part, on the interplay of culture and power » (Rosaldo, 1993 : 193). But linked to my researcher's persona, my own social positions, as dictated by multiple social characteristics, experiences, and trajectories, have deeply affected the dynamics of such interactions. In this sense, my different identities preclude a single, unified person, and instead I, as the knowing person, am composed of different social identities that I deploy dissimilarly given the particular moment and interaction during the collection of data. I am a woman, a mother, a researcher, a Salvadoran, and an immi-

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grant, to name only a few of my social positions. Consequently, as a researcher I simply cannot be a detached observer looking neutrally at the social reality before my eyes. My overlapping membership in the distinct communities of birth, residence, education – to name a few – means that when I observe as a social researcher I will do so through these different lenses.

At the same time, the people in my studies are not neutral participants either. Just as I am, as a researcher, a « positioned subject » (Rosaldo, 1993), my study participants are also analyzing subjects. As human beings engaged in an interaction, my study participants and I are not blank slates. Their reactions to my presence are very much informed by my own social identities and positions, and thus, in the act of doing research we engage in a relational interaction. The knowledge that is produced is very much the result of this interaction, and it is intimately linked to the interpretation of each other's positions, or as Rosaldo (1993 : 207) refers to it, « the interpretation of cultures. » It is in this light that I provide these reflections of how my own positions and identities might have influenced my relationship with my study participants, and thus, shaped the nature of the data I gathered, the analysis, and my writing.

Before I engage in this discussion I must make an observation regarding reflexivity and self-disclosure on the part of the researcher. Briefly, in the United States the civil rights movement and the emergence of political movements responsive to internally oppressed peoples in the 1960s and 1970s led to an interrogation of the canons of disciplinary teaching and research. By bringing to the center of the analytical plane the concerns of groups whose voices were marginal at best, this shift provided an impetus for academics to take a critical position, not only of society itself, but also of their disciplines. In the field of ethnography, this has translated into debunking the myth of the detached, objective observer and replacing it with a politically conscious academic who can no longer remain impartial. This shift, of course, is not completed and the crises it has produced continue to the present. But in the process, social analysis has been reshaped and the questions academics pose and how they decide to answer them (methodologically and substantively) have also changed significantly.

At the same time feminist researchers have been advocating for special research strategies that require listening carefully to subtleties, attitudes and feelings, as crucial aspects of women's lives are usually overlooked in social surveys (Reinharz, 1992). These researchers propose a feminist ethic and commitment to egalitarianism in research, which includes intimacy and self-disclosure (See Oakley, 1981). This distinct model for research involves developing a relationship with the subjects and treating them as valued individuals and not merely as data providers, immersing oneself in the social setting, and aiming for the intersubjective understanding between researchers and those studied (Reinharz, 1992). This approach also includes the option of downplaying one's professional status when studying people who may distrust professionals and in this way fostering trust between themselves and those being studied (Reinharz, 1992). In this way, even those who come from relatively powerless groups may feel empowered to be able to ask questions and obtain information from the researcher (Webb, 1984). Obviously, this

approach stands in sharp contrast to the detached, hierarchical nature of doing research in a more « scientific » tradition.

In the spirit of this tradition, at this point some self-disclosure on my part is in order. I was born and raised in El Salvador in a middle class environment. I was educated in an all-girls private Catholic school, and my family has had the means to live very comfortably. My migration to the United States was in part precipitated by the civil war that raged in El Salvador from approximately 1980 to 1992. In my last year of high school it seemed more and more dangerous to enter college, as the main university campuses were the locus of much political action and, thus, repression on the part of the government. Thus, immediately after I finished high school, my family facilitated (and urged) my departure for the United States to attend college. Thus, in many ways my migration experience was quite dissimilar from that of most of the Central Americans I have studied, as I migrated legally, never traveled the dangerous routes they do in order to reach the United States, never lived in the neighborhoods they come to inhabit, and have continued to travel extensively after migrating.

My first few months of university life in the United States were dedicated to learning English, as I had some familiarity with this language from traveling annually to the United States for vacation, but I needed language instruction in order to enroll in classes. Thus, like many immigrants, my first months in the new country were spent learning the language and disentangling the cultural ropes of the new environment. However, unlike most of the immigrants in my studies, I did not have to work, and could dedicate myself entirely to my studies. After finishing one degree, I continued on to earn a postgraduate degree and then another, so that since my entry in college upon arrival in the United States I never left the academic environment. In fact, in contrast to the experience of many US colleagues who have had to hold less remunerated non-academic jobs occupations to support themselves, I have never held a job outside of academia. Undoubtedly, my work trajectory and my academic immersion reflect my relatively privileged social class position, particularly in relation to the immigrants in my studies, and shape in countless ways my own views and interactions with them in the field.

There is much I have shared with the participants in my studies, however. In addition to a common language, an immigrant background (though dissimilar in many ways) and the nostalgia of living in a foreign environment, I have been able to effortlessly navigate the cultural terrain of their daily lives. I easily understand cultural subtleties, jokes, and references to a particular place and date and can, of course, engage in conversations that might be misunderstood by an outsider. I do not doubt that this common ground and identification promoted meaningful conversations with my study participants. And herein lies an interesting paradox of my persona as a Salvadoran and as a researcher. From the beginning of my studies I knew that I would be crossing different borders, of gender, age, class, education, background, and later on, when I began doing research in Guatemalan communities, those of nationality and ethnicity as well. Thus, I knew that I would be simultaneously an « insider » and an « outsider ». But my Salvadoranness (not only my nationality, but the sociocultural codes that I inherited from having been born and raised in El Salvador) positions me in the place of a « native » when

I do research among Central Americans. Thus, I could only distance myself to a certain degree. Similar to Dorinne Kondo's (1986) experiences conducting fieldwork as a Japanese-American in Japan, I have often felt pressured to conform with certain norms more fully than would outsiders. Because of my study participants' cultural expectations about me, a person who looks like them and speaks their language – literally and culturally – they have compelled me to act as a native, as fully one of them. This has both enabled and constrained what I have been able to do in the field.

I am perfectly aware that my « nativeness » gave me numerous advantages in the field, as I was able to gain rapid entry into my study participants' social worlds, something outsiders would have found more difficult to do. However, similar to Kondo's experiences, the same « nativeness » that allowed me to gain quick entry and easily establish rapport with my study participants has simultaneously hindered my data collection in other respects. I could not ask questions that would have been inappropriate given certain cultural expectation regarding age, gender, or other social hierarchies. In many instances I could not cross certain delicate status lines. Thus, like in Kondo's case, I constructed social knowledge through different power relations that involved different degrees of distance, so that in the process of knowing, different parts of my persona were deployed and, as such, these have represented multiple sources of knowledge in my work.

In what follows I provide a discussion of the different social positions that have been prominent at different points in the studies I have conducted. Obviously I do not deploy each of these social positions alone, as it is the combination of all and how they are articulated at different times and places that bear upon the knowledge that I generate with my research. Together they should give the reader a sense of my framework, of my persona, and how this shapes my interactions in the field. Moreover, the discussion I present here does not encompass all the possible identities that have shaped my research. We cross several boundaries in our daily lives, some of which are more formal and determined, such as the ones I will reference below, others less so. Borders to cross arise from particular intersections, experiences and moments in one's life course, and not only from the more formal determinants such as gender, class, and race (Rosaldo, 1993). Life and death produce distinctive experiences that often provide a common ground in human interaction through which we are able to connect and establish meaningful relationships with others, including during fieldwork. For instance, I became part of the « community » of mothers when my son was born and the « community » of the bereaved when my parents and aunt passed away. There are many other « communities » of which I am similarly a part that lie at the core of other identities I possess.

The objective of the research I report in the following sections was generally to examine the social processes of the migration of Central Americans in the United States. I conducted field research among Salvadorans in San Francisco from approximately 1989 to 1994, among Guatemalans in Los Angeles throughout 1995, with Salvadorans in Washington DC from 1996 to 1997, and with a mix of Salvadorans, Guatemalans, Mexicans, and Cubans in Phoenix from 1998 to 2001. These studies have allowed me to write about social and kinship networks and family dynamics, intergenerational and gen-

der relations, transnational activities, and these immigrants' perceptions of the church and religion in their lives. In each study, I have used a combination of archival data, intensive interviewing and participant observation; in two of the four studies I have conducted trained graduate students in ethnographic data collection have aided me. The duration of the interviews and of participant observation, where an interview and participant observation took place, how the information was collected (tape-recorded, notes), and who else could be present during an interview, were just a few of the practical details of data collection that were affected by my different social characteristics (and when I worked with research assistants, by those of my assistants as well).

GENDER

One of the most salient identities that has shaped the course of my research and the kinds of data I have collected is the fact that I am a woman. Of course this does not occur in the absence of other characteristics I possess, but in this section I will attempt to isolate the effects it has had on my research activities. I will describe specific moments from the field to illustrate.

In the study I conducted among Salvadorans in San Francisco (Menjívar, 2000), whenever possible I spent time with the people I studied, such as accompanying them on errands and to visit family members and acquaintances. I visited people in their homes and simply « hanged out » in the places they conducted their daily lives. But because of my gender I could not accomplish this objective in the same way with men and women.

I would easily stop by my female study participants' homes, spend time with them alone in their homes (even in their rooms), and give them rides in my car to different places they needed to go. I simply could not establish the same kind of rapport with my male informants. I could not invite them to eat at a local restaurant or talk with them in their own rooms like I did with women. But I had to interview men and women separately because almost invariably the women and the men expressed themselves differently when they were in the presence of other people, particularly of people from the opposite sex. I could not do this easily with men, as I had to look for less intimate spaces, such as an office I used during the course of fieldwork, to speak with them alone lest our conversations would be misunderstood as invitations to romance. Sometimes I would speak with the partners, husbands, or brothers of the women I was visiting, or would participate in a conversation that included men. At a food distribution program where I contacted several of my study participants I also spoke with men. In approximately four years of fieldwork, only once I had coffee with an informant in a local restaurant, and after having established a friendship with a group of four politically-active men who shared a house (and who thought of themselves as « liberated »), did I interview them.

Another area in which my gender was salient was in the course of conducting an interview. Some researchers argue that interviewing is particularly suited to female researchers, as they perform an activity women are socialized to do, at least in Western societies (Reinharz, 1992). Indeed, Kathy Charmaz (cited in Reinhartz 1992) observes that interviewing draws on the « feminine role, » that of an understanding, receptive person who is able to

talk about the other person's feelings in a non-threatening way. When I interviewed women I simply carried on a conversation; they would ask me questions almost as much as I did, and even though I based my inquiry on a set of open-ended questions from a semi-structured interview schedule, I did not look at it often during the interview. This happened in particular when the women would expand on a topic and become very involved and even emotional in their account (Menjívar, 1999a, 2000). During these moments I found it insensitive to look down at a questionnaire to continue with the next question. However, with the men I would do exactly the opposite. The people I studied in general, but some of the men in particular, appreciated the fact that I showed sincere interest in what they had to say, that I was receptive and even wanted to hear more. For many of them our conversations were the only opportunities they had had since arriving in the United States to vent their worries, their preoccupations, their fears, and often the conversations would be filled with emotion. An elderly man I interviewed told me, at the end of a three and one-half hour conversation, that this had been the first time in more than a year that he had actually sat down to speak about his views of life in the United States. Because one part of the interview included personal questions about marriage and relationships, whenever I got to this point, I would make sure to look at the interview schedule and read the questions when I was interviewing men, so that they would know this information was something I needed for my study, that I was not simply guided by more personal curiosity or interest.

Therefore, I am aware that my closeness with my female study participants generated data I could not obtain from male participants, but I could not risk « ruining » my reputation in the field, as I was known as a compatriot who was doing a study, and getting too close to men would have been detrimental to the study. When moving in a cultural field where orthodox gender ideologies demarcate strict boundaries between men and women and their field of movement, as a « native » I was obliged to behave according to a distinct set of cultural expectations that the people I studied had of me.

CLASS BACKGROUND

But, as Catherine Riessman (1987) observes, gender is not enough. Accessing women who come from a lower class or educational background may be as difficult for a native as for a non-native, or as difficult as accessing men by a woman. Differences based on other social demarcations must be overcome if one needs to access a wide range of respondents. Like Ruth Horowitz (Horowitz in her study of Chicano gangs points out, differences by other forms of social differentiation, such as class, sexual identity, marital status, and life style must be overcome in order to reach a diverse range of women). Trust and bonds should be earned, and in my case, it was with both men and women, of different social strata.

At first I was afraid that differences in educational levels, but mostly class differences (both in El Salvador and in the United States), would create a barrier between the people I studied and I, and we would be unable to converse genuinely. Despite my trepidation about crossing class lines, I was surprised by the openness and the ease with which my study participants spoke to

me about their lives. Only after conversing at length with them did I realize that there were class-bound aspects of their lives that were alien to me. My worries about the obstacle that our class differences would represent often were dissipated when my informants would joke and tease me about my inadequacies in dealing with the hypothetical situations they would sometimes pose to me, which were all too real in their daily lives – both past and present.

Often my study participants invited me to share with them the little they had, and occasionally I was asked to attend a special event, such as a wedding, a baptism, a birthday party, or even a funeral (Menjívar, 1999a, 2000). Sometimes they would invite me over to their homes when they had prepared a special Salvadoran dish that I had mentioned I particularly missed. On one occasion, a female study participant had prepared pupusas (thick tortillas filled with cheese, pork meat and/or beans), and as I was about to leave, she handed me three wrapped in foil paper. She was concerned that since I lived « around Americans » I would become nostalgic for these Salvadoran delicacies. Over the course of our meals my informants would talk about their life both in the United States and in El Salvador, and would take these opportunities to ask me about my own life. Something that always puzzled them was that even though I spoke English, had legal documents, had several years of graduate education, and « worked at the university, » (at that time) as a research assistant, I was not making much more money (and sometimes even less) than they were. A perceptive woman explained to me that I had found such a warm reception because some of my respondents probably expected me to reciprocate at some point in the future. They did not necessarily want something material, just a friendship with someone from a higher-class background. Indeed, some asked me for favors that needed immediate attention, whereas others asked me for longer-term commitments, such as being the god-mother of a child, an obligation that I gladly accepted.

My initial trepidation about the obstacles that my social position might have presented eventually dissipated. By this I do not mean to naively dismiss the importance of social class differences and the dissimilar power relations that they generate, for no matter how close I got to the people I studied neither them nor I could shed our social class position off. I am sure that there were certain subtleties I missed or information that was not revealed to me precisely due to differences in social class position or educational level. But field research was made possible by my rapport with my informants, which I believe created an environment for sincere interactions and candid conversations both ways.

NATIONALITY

My research on Latin American immigrants has not been limited to Salvadorans alone, as I have also conducted research among Guatemalans (Menjívar, 1999a, 2002a, 2002b) and among Cubans and Mexicans as well (Menjívar, 2001, 2003; Menjívar and Bejarano forthcoming; Skop and Menjívar, 2001), though in the last instance it was with the assistance of a research team (Menjívar et al., 1999), thus my presence as a direct observer was rather limited. But when I was in the field in the studies that included non-Salvadoran immigrants I became more fully aware of my own nationality

and, thus, the data I collected was shaped by this position. To outsiders a researcher of Latin American origin should find it relatively easy to study immigrants from Latin America. But precisely because I am of Latin American origin, my Salvadoran nationality became relevant for the Latin American immigrants I studied, and I have no doubt that their knowledge of my nationality shaped how they reacted to my presence and to my questions. But perhaps it was the closeness of our nationalities that mattered, as I, a Salvadoran, was interested for instance in what Guatemalan immigrants had to say about their lives in the United States. Because I was not interviewing Salvadorans in Los Angeles when I interviewed Guatemalans and when I introduced myself I would explain that I was doing research only among Guatemalans, some of the Guatemalans might have wondered why I did not simply go and talk to my « own people. » In fact, some Salvadorans I met during the course of this study asked me just that ; some were a bit offended that I was not interested in talking with them. But I would explain that this time it was Guatemalans I needed to talk to, since earlier I had done a much more involved study with Salvadoran immigrants.

The Guatemalans would recognize a different accent and immediately ask me where I was from. To my response some would say, « Oh but you don't speak like a Salvadoran, » or « You don't look like a Salvadoran, » or « I wasn't sure whether you were one or not. » In their own mind they were perhaps trying to distance me from the Salvadorans with whom they come into daily contact (and letting me know about it) because it is with Salvadorans that they often marry, with whom they have children, with whom they live and interact, with whom they commemorate an independence day, with whom they pray in temples and churches, and with whom they celebrate religious festivities and holidays. At the same time, it is with Salvadorans with whom they compete for jobs or for housing, and with whom they fight for the meager resources in the often-impooverished neighborhoods in which they live. So my study participants, in a gesture that was meant well, tried to separate me from those Salvadorans with whom they often have a close and complex relationship, so as to see me as a person with whom they could talk openly. Thus, even though I was doing research among people of a nationality very close to my own, among whom I often felt like a « native, » I am certain that there were points of view, perspectives, and other information that I simply could not access because, paradoxically, of the very aspect of my life that would bring me closer to them.

OTHER HIERARCHIES

It has been observed that when feminists research men or institutions with considerable power, or in general « study up, » they are likely to demand less (Reinharz, 1992), that they are reluctant to make demands on people of greater social status or power than the researcher. This situation can arise in a range or diverse contexts and hierarchies. For me, it came up when I studied immigrants' relationship and perception of the church in their lives (Menjívar, 1999b, 2001, 2003). I visited Evangelical churches, attended services in these temples, and interviewed male pastors easily and without any major concerns. Except for sometimes asking me to consider my own conver-

sion to their religion, I was never faced with any personal questions when I collected data in these churches. I had a very different experience when I conducted fieldwork in Catholic churches and interviewed Catholic priests. Because I am Catholic there were some questions, some events, some moments that I had a difficult time recording or observing for the purposes of a study. I was raised Catholic in a Latin American setting, where priests command more authority than these religious workers do in the United States, and where they are respected and almost never questioned about their professional activities. From this position, did I really have a right to question and probe what a Catholic priest tells me? Sure I was a researcher and consciously this was the persona I deployed in my interviews with the priests, but was I not a Catholic first, had I not received most of the sacraments before I became the researcher that now is probing the priests for answers for a « scientific » study? This issue was perhaps exacerbated because in the study I conducted in Washington DC (Menjívar, 1999b) the priests I had to interview were Salvadoran like me, and in a casual manner they would ask me something that would remind me of my identity as a Catholic, like whether I had already baptized my son or if I was going to attend a particular religious celebration. Perhaps a non-Catholic person (or even a Catholic not raised in Latin America?) would have seen no reason for any trepidations about asking priests to explain exactly what they mean by something, or « playing devil's advocate » and ask them to consider hypothetical negative consequences for their actions. But as a person who was raised in a deeply Catholic family and in an environment where the Catholic religion and culture often overlap, I did. From my position as a Catholic priests command great authority and respect and are linked to eternal questions and spiritual realms, and even though I was perfectly aware that they were, like other study participants, subject to my research questions, something precluded me from fully demanding answers from them.

Something similar occurred when I conducted participant observation during Catholic celebrations, particularly in masses. Very often I had to pause and remind myself that I was attending a mass as a researcher, not simply as a Catholic, that I had to « observe » a familiar, intimate event but from a different position and through the lens of my research persona. I have attended countless masses in my life, including the obligatory daily masses of my childhood and adolescence, so being in this utterly familiar environment trying to keep a distance in order to « observe » was not easy. Interestingly, this exercise allowed me to reflect on certain aspects of the ritual that I had never seen before, even though I had wondered about the usefulness of attending a ritual I knew by heart for my study. The only thing I simply could not do was to take extensive notes during a mass.

I am well aware that I did not collect certain types of information that an outsider could have easily collected since from my own social position I could not make too many demands from the Catholic religious workers. At the same time, being Catholic (and perhaps Salvadoran in the cases I interviewed Salvadoran priests) opened doors and provided me with quick and easy access to these religious workers and even to other kinds of information that perhaps an outsider could not have recorded.

FINAL OBSERVATIONS

As should be clear from these reflections, the process of knowing and analysis can be done either from up close, as in the case of a native, or from a distance, either as a near native or as an outsider. Both are equally valid and produce important, yet different, knowledge that either one could not generate alone. Doing research from one of these positions alone may accomplish much, but too severely restricts what might otherwise be legitimate sources of knowledge for the study of social dynamics. Furthermore, as demonstrated above, the demarcation between an « insider » and an « outsider » is not always clear-cut, as researchers who are insiders in one respect may very well be outsiders in multiple others. The important aspect of reflecting on one's position vis-à-vis our research is that it allows us to rethink objectivism, and as Rosaldo (1993) points out, to go beyond being social analysts to become social critics.

Although I have separated some of my social positions here for the purpose of the discussion, I want to reiterate that it is the confluence of all impinges on the observations I have made, the data I have collected, and the analysis I have conducted. Each identity makes a part of me, and as Kondo (1986) observes, the process of knowing takes the whole person. In this sense, rather than trying to remain detached and « objective » one should explicitly recognize each of our identities as potential avenues of knowing, as legitimate sources of knowledge. This kind of positioning and the research conducted, therefore, can lead to building new theories and explanations, in particular unveiling forms of oppression and inequality that may remain hidden to a more « scientific » detached observer.

My background and multiples identities created differential power relations that shaped the nature of my exchanges with my study participants. No one entered the interactions we had as blank slates, as we reacted to each other from our multiple social positions. A shared nationality or ethnicity and language helped somewhat to counter – not to erase – important differences and to give me quick access to the groups I have studied. Furthermore, perhaps because my study participants and I were all in a foreign land, I was perceived as someone who could at least understand, if not share, their experiences. However, because of our proximity, those same characteristics that were key to my research also constrained me from obtaining certain kinds of information.

The tradition of self-disclosure is intimately linked to engagement and political consciousness and advocacy for the people we study. Thus, I have taken part in the immigrants' lives. I have tried to contribute to improve their lives in various ways, both with the knowledge I have gained through my research and as a researcher in the field. In the studies I have conducted among immigrants, it has not been possible (or desirable) to keep distant or to abide by principles of detachment and neutrality. I have encouraged and then transported pregnant women – many of them undocumented – to sign up for prenatal or other forms of medical care. I have helped some to locate suitable resources and to fill out the necessary paperwork, at the very moment when politicians were attacking immigrants for supposedly draining the state of resources. I have helped to translate documents and to fill out immigration forms. I have given rides to my study participants and their families and

friends. Occasionally I have even provided job contacts. In sum, my role as a researcher has become an informal one, as my study participants' networks temporarily expanded to include me as a potential source of assistance. Beyond the personal level, I have also organized an informational fair to provide immigrants with information about community resources (using as a guide to organize it my study participants' concerns about information they needed in their daily lives) and have provided interviews and statements used in various forums to help improve conditions for immigrants. In this way, in my mind, I have contributed from my own position and in the measure that my resources allow, so that the immigrants represented in my studies can live more dignified lives. Certainly, I have not remained detached.

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RÉSUMÉ - RESUMEN - ABSTRACT

Fondé sur plus d'une décennie de travail de terrain auprès des communautés d'immigrés centro-américains dans différentes villes des États-Unis d'Amérique, l'auteur présente une réflexion sur ses relations avec les personnes qui y participaient. Elle analyse la façon dont ses multiples caractéristiques, expériences et trajectoires ont profondément affecté la dynamique de ces interactions. Paradoxalement, les mêmes caractéristiques qui rendent facile l'accès à un groupe ou à un individu peuvent empêcher la collecte d'information sur ce même groupe. En soulignant les différences et les similitudes entre chercheur et enquêtés, l'auteur conclut que les chercheurs utilisant les démarches qualitatives, loin d'être neutres, sont engagés dans l'acte même d'investigation. Dans ce sens, les caractéristiques personnelles tant du chercheur que des enquêtés informent la nature des données obtenues, l'analyse qui en est faite et, en dernier lieu, le produit écrit.

Basándome en más de una década de trabajo de campo en comunidades de inmigrantes centroamericanos en diferentes ciudades de EEUU, en el presente trabajo reflexiono sobre mis relaciones con las personas que han participado en dichos estudios. Relato como mis múltiples características, experiencias y trayectorias han afectado profundamente la dinámica de dichas interacciones. Paradojicamente, las mismas características que facilitan

acceso a un grupo o individuo pueden impedir la recolección de datos en ese grupo. Subrayando diferencias y similitudes entre los participantes en mis estudios y yo, propongo que lejos de ser investigadores neutros, investigadores que utilizan metodologías cualitativas son actores comprometidos en el acto de la investigación y por lo tanto, las características personales tanto de la investigadora como de los estudiados afectan la naturaleza de los datos, el análisis y lo que se escribe.

Based on more than a decade of research in Central American immigrant communities in different US cities, I share reflections about my interactions with study participants in the different communities I have studied. I recount how my multiple social characteristics, experiences, and trajectories have deeply affected the dynamics of such interactions. Paradoxically, those same characteristics that might facilitate access to a particular individual or groups can simultaneously hinder data collection among the same group. Highlighting differences and similarities between my study participants and myself, I argue that far from being a detached observer, the qualitative researcher is engaged in the act of conducting research, and thus, personal characteristics of both the researcher and the researched shape the nature of the data gathered, the analysis, and ultimately what is written.

Mots clés: États-Unis, villes, immigrés, centraméricains, démarches qualitatives

Palabras claves: Estados Unidos, ciudades, inmigrantes, centroamericanos, metodologías cualitativas

Keywords: United States, cities, immigrants, centroamericans, qualitative research