Running head: FIELD RESEARCH IN COLOMBIA

Conducting Field Research amid Violence: Experiences from Colombia

**Abstract**

Conducting research in violent environments poses particular challenges for researchers and participants. The current chapter explores factors that influence field research in Colombia prior to and immediately following the peace accord in 2016, which formally ended the country's 50-year conflict between the government and the country’s largest guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (after its Spanish abbreviation FARC). The authors include Colombian and international researchers, practitioners, and academics and offers three proposals. First, working in violent contexts demands that the research is flexible and responds to the participants’ voices and needs. This type of research may be particularly coherent with Participatory Action Research (PAR), which explicitly recognizes the power and agency of local actors who navigate conflict issues on a daily basis. Second, we demonstrate how ongoing violence poses obstacles, offers opportunities, and shapes each phase of investigation, such as research design and data collection. For example, we discuss how to select regions to study that are safe for the team and for participants to engage in research. Relatedly, a strong, local network is essential to research on sensitive social issues relating to on-going conflict dynamics. Third, the inclusion of emerging researchers, particularly from the conflict setting, in the team may increase local capacity as well as the longevity of the project. We reflect on the challenges and opportunities to including emerging researchers and conclude the chapter by suggesting how these issues may apply to other conflict and post-agreement settings.

**Introduction**

This chapter is the outcome of reflections among a group of authors with diverse backgrounds and experiences conducting research in Colombia, although aspects may be applied to other countries with post-accord scenarios characterized by high levels of continued violence. Our research broadly covers aspects of peacebuilding and social reconstruction, with a focus on youth and participant engagement across settings (see Nilsson & Taylor, 2017; Restrepo, 2019; Taylor, Nilsson, & Amezquita-Castro, 2016).

In this chapter, we begin with a transparent and reflective examination about ourselves as authors and our orientation to conducting field research in settings of on-going violence. We then provide an overview of the situation in Colombia, its actors, and the steps that led to the recent peace process. Complementing this section is a brief history of Participatory Action Research (PAR) in Colombia, and how its focus on community empowerment offers a way of responding to participants’ and communities’ needs within the research design. We argue that this approach is important to consider, as societies marked by physical violence often have underlying forms of structural violence and social exclusion. Given this foundation, the following section identifies factors to consider when conducting field research in violent environments; multiple forms of collaboration and working with local actors is prioritized in such settings. In the closing section, we propose sustainability as a key issue of peace research. Toward this end, we suggest partnering with emerging researchers, especially from local contexts, as such partnerships can enhance the research process and contribute to its lasting impact.

Underlying our understanding of how to conduct research in conflict and post-conflict societies, or simply in environments experiencing high levels of violence, are a number of principles. First, research in these environments is complex and greatly benefits from an interdisciplinary team. Pooling the insights, knowledge, and experience of different fields engaged with conflict and post-conflict settings enables the team to gain insight from a range of perspectives. This diversity in viewpoints allows for a more integral analysis of the situation and a research design that reflects and respects the complexity of the research undertaken. For this chapter, we therefore build on experiences and knowledge from researchers with backgrounds in psychology, history, peace and conflict, communication, and development studies.

Second, research in such environments benefits from a diverse research team that balances experienced and early-career researchers, local and international perspectives, and academics and practitioners. The combination of experienced and emerging researchers helps to avoid the pitfalls of established and potentially inflexible lines of thinking, while also enabling a research environment that fosters the capacity of future generations of scholars through an apprenticeship approach. Following this understanding, the authors of this chapter span three age decades and two generations. Furthermore, diversity includes geographical 'insiders and outsiders'. Colombian researchers, for example, have experienced conflict and violence from a more pragmatic and closer position, thereby allowing them to contribute to the research with invaluable insights. At the same time, international researchers may have more comparative experiences from working in other conflict-settings and may not be as constrained by the daily reality of violence. Reflecting this type of diversity, the authors come from Colombia, Colombia via Canada, Germany working in Sweden, and the United States working in Ireland.

Lastly, research in violent environments should have a normative inclination toward applicability focused on improving the livelihoods of those who have, and continue to, suffer. This objective cannot be achieved without taking into consideration the experiences, advice, and insight from practitioners (e.g., NGOs, government agencies, etc.) who are in daily connection with the local communities. Without these connections, academic research runs the risk of remaining in the sphere of theoretical contributions, unable to provoke or to even be suitable for practical outcomes. The authors of this chapter have worked as both researchers and practitioners, which helps to link local, grassroots perspectives with the larger theoretical frameworks.

**Colombia: Continued Violence despite a Peace Agreement**

Conducting research in Colombia requires an in-depth understanding of the levels and forms of violence that have been and still are part of peoples’ everyday lives. For over half a century, the Colombian people have been caught in the crossfire of a deadly conflict between internal guerrilla groups, paramilitaries, and government security forces. This history of violence has resulted in over six million internally displaced people and refugees as well as the loss of more than eight million lives (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2015; Red Nacional de Información, 2018).

The conflict was originally sparked by widespread dissatisfaction with unequal distribution of power, wealth, and land dating back to colonial times. Rising violence in the 1960s, a period known as *La Violencia* [the Violence], produced a number of armed groups opposing the elite-driven national government and supported by the impoverished and neglected peasant class from decentralized rural areas. Soon after, paramilitary counter-insurgency groups emerged to fight the left-wing guerrilla groups and protect the land-owning elite (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2016). In later decades, the conflict has been increasingly fuelled by a rising production and traffic of illegal drugs. In turn, this sustained and intensified the methods of armed actors, including guerrilla, paramilitaries, state security, and the Colombian government, ultimately producing an entangled net of violence and corruption (Angelo, 2017; McDermott, 2004; Fitzpatrick & Norby, 2013).

After a number of failed negotiation attempts during the 1980s and the 1990s between the Colombian government and the largest guerrilla group, the FARCor *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), a peace agreement was signed in 2016 after four years of negotiations. Yet, in the context of a referendum, the Colombian people narrowly rejected the peace accord, thereby demonstrating the level of polarization currently existing in the country (Registraduría Nacional del Estado Civil, 2016). At the heart of this divide among voters lie variations in views of justice, restoration, and forgiveness. For instance, supporters of the treaty applauded its emphasis on restorative justice in the form of reparation to affected communities, while those opposing it raised concerns about the amnesty granted to many FARC members, and the possibility of reduced jail time even for leaders convicted of crimes against humanity (Josi, 2017). Nevertheless, in the weeks following the referendum, the Colombian Congress approved a slightly revised version of the peace accord (Angelo, 2017; Casey, 2016). Although the new text incorporated many of the concerns raised by detractors, the revised version failed to unite Colombians; polarization continues to characterize Colombia’s position toward peace.

Peace, therefore, has been accomplished mainly on paper. According to official statistics, homicide rates have been declining since former Colombian president Alvaro Uribe began a zero-tolerance campaign against the FARC in 2002. However, homicide rates have actually increased considerably from 2017 to 2019 in rural areas, particularly those involved in coca production (FIP, 2018). In fact, the new drug substitution program has caused violent resistance by armed groups involved in the flourishing cocaine trade. Furthermore, the disarmament and demobilization process of the FARC has created growing dissident units who joined the *bacrim* (criminal bands) that were in part a result of previous disarmament processes of paramilitary forces in the early 2000s (FIP, 2018).

Specific peacebuilding efforts anchored in the peace agreement have also been met with violent resistance. The United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia has received reports that between the signing of the peace accord and the end of 2018, 454 human rights defenders and social leaders have been murdered, 110 of them in 2018 alone. Eighty-five former FARC-EP members have also been assassinated (United Nations Security Council, 2018). Land restitution as part of victims’ reparation has created new conflicts and fueled the creation of anti-restitution armies (Nilsson & Taylor, 2017). Finally, the retraction of the FARC has spurred illegal economic activity. Illicit mining and logging, as well as coca production areas, have increasingly become a battleground for FARC dissidents, former paramilitary and left-wing guerrilla factions, and new criminal and guerrilla groups (FIP, 2018; United Nations Human Rights Council, 2017). Hence, researchers engaging in field research in Colombia need to tread carefully, as the following sections will demonstrate.

**Participatory Action Research in Colombia**

Keeping in mind Colombia’s history of violence and attempts at peace, the aim of the following section is to provide an overview of a research methodology that supports local efforts while protecting the communities and local actors involved. In this light, Participatory Action Research (PAR) may be an ideal methodology to work in contexts of violence or armed conflict. In such settings, recognizing the researcher’s positionality as a social actor is necessary “to understand the links that exist between the development of scientific thought, the cultural context and the power structures of society” (Ortiz & Borjas, 2008, p. 4). Although PAR might not be the methodological approach taken by those conducting research in conflict-laden settings, this section suggests ways that the principles of participatory methods may shape or influence other forms of inquiry.

At its origins, PAR promotes processes of empowerment and social transformation. Following paradigms centered on social conscience and inequality, PAR aims to include different groups and communities in research processes oriented toward social change. Action research and participatory learning, achieved through awareness, contextual sensitivity, and collective emancipatory attitudes, are necessary ingredients for collective progress and democracy (Borda, 2008). Colombian sociologist Fals Borda, a leader of this methodology, argues that experiential knowledge entails respecting the cultural and environmental context. A PAR approach, therefore, creates research that is more flexible, holistic, and democratic in nature (Borda, 2008). Research participants are not only the providers of information, but also agents of social change. Toward this end, PAR’s focus on community empowerment can facilitate sustainable peace in violence-laden contexts (Lykes & Crosby, 2015).

Complementing the objectivity, neutrality, and standardized tools in a positivist paradigm, a PAR approach facilitates increased proximity between the researcher and the context of study. This proximity may be particularly important if research teams are comprised mainly of ‘outsider’ perspectives. The research partnership with networks of local actors can enhance understanding of the communities’ internal dynamics; for example, it may foster trust between researchers and community members (see Vestergren & Drury, 2020 in this volume for a further discussion of trust in the field). The participation of local actors also advances PAR’s goal to link theory with practice and social change (Borda, 2008). These PAR research partnerships, in turn, can facilitate reflection, within the research team and with the communities they are working with, which is crucial for sustainable change.

PAR, like other research paradigms, is not without limits. First, it is important to manage both community and researcher expectations as part of responsible research. Honesty and transparency about the research’s limited outcomes are essential. For example, generating knowledge with only a long-term aim of social change may not be sufficient to motivate communities to take part in PAR. Nevertheless, the paradigm’s participatory and pragmatic elements enable emancipatory and formative experiences. There are a host of direct and indirect beneficiaries of a PAR approach, including communities, activists, leaders, local actors, and researchers (Borda, 2008).

Participatory practices also highlight how perceptions of the researcher’s political or ideological affiliations may be complicated in conflict settings. We underscore two situations in which perceived political affiliation affected the quality of the research, on the one hand, and led to the researcher’s demise, on the other. First, in areas historically linked with paramilitary groups and right-wing ideology, research collaboration with social support organizations may be perceived as sympathizing with left-wing guerrilla groups. In these instances, the communities involved may not only be difficult to approach but may also camouflage their problems or distort the reality by making the power dynamics invisible. Second, researchers who develop deep relationships with communities exposed to situations of control and territorial power at the hands of illegal armed groups may be seen as a threat. Tragically, university professor Alberto Alzate Patiño was murdered because his research on the environmental impact of hydroelectric projects clashed with economic interests. The paramilitaries perceived his work to be affiliated with left-wing ideologies and, therefore, close to the guerrillas (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2014a). Thus, as PAR increases the focus on the researcher, additional concerns arise in violent contexts.

Finally, PAR emphasizes the dissemination of results, or what is known as systematic return. Specifically, the socialization of knowledge conferred by the ‘investigating educators’ enables a pedagogical function of research (Ortiz & Borjas, 2008). This approach implies that researchers have a social commitment to return the results of the inquiry to participants (see Figueiredo, Rocha, & Montagna, 2020 in this volume for more on returning research to participants). Importantly, acquired knowledge should be expressed using different means (e.g., comics, audio-visuals, descriptive and explanatory documents), depending on the level of political and educational development of the groups involved (Ortiz & Borjas, 2008).

Borda’s own research in the late 1960s epitomizes the impact of systematic return. His work examined how rural communities sought land restitution in the Caribbean coast. Borda’s work on the history of oppression and marginalization of these communities, and how they organized themselves, facilitated a transformation of their realities. For example, Borda and other researchers (e.g., Victor Negrete) developed timely teaching materials to disseminate the process and, thus, generated effective pedagogy on the rights and freedoms of the farmer communities (Fundación del Sinú, 1985). This example demonstrates how a PAR approach is strongly linked to social processes that are crucial to sustaining peace in amid conflict.

**Key Considerations to Conducting Field Research in a Setting of Violence**

Even if a PAR approach is not the primary methodology, research amid protracted violent conflict calls for further adjustments across different phases of research. The reflections and lessons learned over a decade of work in Colombia may also be useful for researchers in this setting and in other contexts of political violence and armed conflict. This section presents cross-cutting issues that may be relevant to consider in both qualitative and quantitative methods. Our interdisciplinary examples draw on this mixed methods approach and incorporate elements of PAR as well. In sum, we offer these key considerations as important points for reflection across of range of disciplines and methodological approaches.

**Ethical Considerations**

We strongly support oversight and engaged conversations with university ethics committees or institutional review boards. When working with university partners in Colombia, they have either accepted the international ethics approval or have their own clear guidelines that require the same reflection and reporting. Many ethical considerations in conflict-laden settings are similar to those in non-violent settings. For example, informed consent would include explanation of the research, how the research may benefit the participant, legally reportable incidents, etc. When working with youth under 18 years old, we always obtained informed consent and assent, thereby following best practices and operating procedures (Crane & Broome, 2017). This includes written consent and use of an “X” in the case of lower or non-literate participants. However, in settings affected by violence, clearly and accurately explaining the goals of the research may help to manage participants’ expectations about the potential benefits of the study. Consistent with PAR, empowering communities to make informed decisions will promote their involvement in the social change practices embedded within the design, should they decide to partake in the investigation.

Yet, as with any cross-cultural research, expectations and standards may present ethical dilemmas that vary across contexts. For instance, conducting research in societies affected by wide-spread violence, other forms of aggression are frequently more common. In some of our research with at-risk Colombian youth in inner-city schools in Bogotá, one participant described being physically disciplined by their mother. In North America, this would immediately be reported to the authorities. However, as a research team we had to consider the ambiguity of the child’s account (in Spanish, ‘getting hit’ can signify a slap on the wrist or a fist punch), the cultural norms for the corporal punishment of children (a practice that is more acceptable in Colombia), the negative effects that our intervention may have on the family and child (e.g., exacerbation of abuse), and the schools’ ability to follow-up with the case. Although corporal punishment may not be acceptable in other countries that have not experience violent conflict, it is an example of the type of ethical dilemmas that have emerged in our research in Colombia.

**Research Design**

As with all research, the design should be developed to answer the research questions. It is likely that when working in such settings, researchers will be asking questions about violence exposure and other risk factors related to the prolonged conflict. Therefore, at the study design phase, selecting regions that are pertinent to the questions at hand, but also relatively safe for the team to travel and for participants to engage in research, is key. In our experience, reaching this balance is greatly facilitated by having access to and collaborating with local networks. For instance, in research on the Caribbean coast of Colombia, we were interested in the antecedents of civic participation in the context of protracted conflict. To this end, we conducted interviews with engaged community members in four types of settings: high/low violence and high/low civic participation. Our ability to safely access these communities and to generate between-group variation on exposure to violence and civic participation was facilitated through our partners at local universities (Taylor, 2012, 2015). In another research project on perceptions of threat, we identified communities that had experienced differences in historical as well as contemporary violence at the hands of different actors, such as the FARC or paramilitary groups (Nilsson & González-Marín, 2018). Our network of local partners greatly facilitated gaining access to the communities and identifying key informants (Nilsson & González-Marín, 2019).

In relation to territorial control and power, in the Colombian context, communities in different areas of the country have been affected by various armed groups in different ways. That is, depending on which groups have, or continue to control a given area, it is possible that the trust and power dynamics differ between communities (López López, 2017). Although individuals in some areas may hold more negative views toward the FARC, in comparison to paramilitary groups or state security actors, the opposite may hold in other areas. For instance, in the ‘false positives’ scandal that erupted in 2008, officials orchestrated the extra-judicial killings of men from vulnerable backgrounds to increase the government’s body count of left-wing guerrillas. Although the population’s outrage following the news may reflect a general sense of distrust in armed groups (within and outside the law), negative attitudes toward military agents may vary depending on factors such as the history and level of victimization within each community (Rojas Bolaños & Benavides Silva, 2017).

Thus, these differences in the control of power and the dynamics between communities and armed groups are relevant to consider in the planning stages of the inquiry (Cohen & Arieli, 2011). Selecting appropriate communities to collaborate with depends on the regions’ characteristics and demographics. Researchers must consider these factors, such as harm to the team and local actors, prior to working in these settings.

Research designs should also be attuned to the communities’ everyday realities, and in particular, an in-depth understanding of individual experiences of harm in the context of the conflict. For instance, when studying urban Colombian youths’ opinions about the recent peace process and their relation to trust in government and armed groups, some of our participants differentiated between the motives behind some groups’ actions and their legitimacy (Restrepo, 2019). Although some adolescents perceived the FARC as being a criminal organization acting for its own benefit, others understood it as a response to the state’s attacks to political freedom and democracy. This is not to say that the latter were supportive of the FARC’s actions; rather, they believed that the group did not operate in a vacuum, but that economic and political factors contributed to their growth and distancing from their initial ideology. Participants holding these views had, for the most part, not been directly exposed to the height of the conflict, while those with more negative perspectives toward the FARC expressed having been affected in some way (e.g., displacement, losing relatives). Ultimately, the research design should remain open to understanding how violence affected individuals and their families, which, in this case, provided a more nuanced view of Colombian adolescents’ understandings of their political and social contexts.

Relatedly, when exposure to violence is the focus of the research, the level of impact that such experience has on someone’s life should also be examined. In our research, we have found that mental health outcomes partially mediate the relationship between exposure to violence and civic engagement (Taylor, 2015). Factoring these psychological differences into our analyses and interpretations has allowed us to provide a richer and more complex picture of the variations in individuals’ lived experiences of harm. Working in violent settings necessitates a consideration of how that conflict has affected the population at the individual level, which may shape the research question and data collection process.

**Data Collection**

Despite best efforts to consider security and safety concerns in the ethics and design phases, continuous reflection and conversation with local partners is necessary not only in the design, but throughout data collection. For example, we have found ourselves in unforeseen and uncomfortable circumstances that shaped how the data were collected. We were working in a rural area that served as a transit point for drug traffickers and was almost completely controlled by paramilitary groups. During the field work, victims of violence were publicly displayed, and we became aware that our activities were closely monitored. In this context, participants were eager to participate, but only under certain conditions. For example, local leaders decided to have a focus group in the middle of the neighborhood street; however, we researchers felt uncomfortable sitting in plain view given the monitoring by paramilitary groups. Even though the interviewees frequently lowered their voices and looked over their shoulders, they also explained that, after internal discussions, they decided that a public display offered more safety than a private meeting place. Although this shaped *how* we collected the data, the participants were engaged and expressed their grievances; this was an example of where a creative response to an ethical concern can enable data collection to move forward (Nilsson & González-Marín, 2018).

Similarly, in rural areas along the north coast of Colombia, for example, the research team’s safety greatly depended on collaboration with local experts. Access to certain communities would have been impossible had we not been in the presence of local actors who helped us ‘blend in’ and prevented us from ‘sticking out’ by surrounding us with a larger group of local community members. More than a tactic to gain the community’s trust, this allowed us to navigate situations in which we were mistaken for criminal elements and met at gun point by the Colombian military.

Supporting these broader security principles, there are a number of logistical safety aspects to consider. For example, we have found that it is advisable for the research team to enter and leave the research settings between set hours. In our experience, registered taxis and hired car services have proven to be reliable and safe, although public transportation may be a more economical option. We recommend the latter be used during daylight and when the settings to be visited are located near a stop or station. However, when visiting rural settings, we often opt for private transportation, as changes in bus schedules (or their complete absence) may be the rule, rather than the exception. In our experience, traveling in larger groups (e.g., triads or more), with ideally gender-mixed teams, was one of the safest options. Depending on the context, we have also found that host families may be more comfortable accepting women for overnight stays. Planning ahead for logistical aspects such as the team size and accommodation is critical to the smooth running of data collection.

Despite taking these logistical steps into consideration, should safety issues arise *during* data collection, researchers must be committed to rescheduling interviews or canceling trips altogether to ensure the team’s and communities’ security. For example, one of our projects in the Cesar region of Colombia had to be canceled because a local network representative had received death threats from paramilitary groups controlling the area. We were advised to avoid doing research in this area, not only for our own safety, but also to protect our informants. This example demonstrates that, despite the benefits of working with local researchers and contacts, this collaboration also brings some risk. The shared insider identity may shape their interactions with others and the interpretations of findings that come from a mutual understanding with the communities. These examples underscore the importance of remaining flexible and adjusting to the preferences of participants and local actors while conducting the research.

When the state is one of the armed actors in a conflict, working with them may also shape how data are collected. For instance, when conducting an evaluation of peacebuilding practices in Colombia (Nilsson, 2018), we were accompanied by military and police bodyguards at all times. Although that was a security requirement when working with the government, the constant accompaniment by state security actors also influenced the project. We insisted that our bodyguards wait outside the interview location to prevent them from seeing the informants. The few times that the bodyguards remained in listening distance, informants whispered into the recorder or wrote their answers, or we restricted ourselves to closed questions that could be answered with simple body language. That is, participants preferred to adjust the interview situation to these conditions rather than losing the opportunity to express their opinions.

Furthermore, although there are exceptional opportunities to influence government policy by conducting research on behalf of or in partnership with state or international actors, there are also additional challenges, including overcoming red tape and navigating norms within those institutions. As an illustration, written agreements negotiated with government actors prior to conducting the research have been helpful tools to make sure that our research is not subjected to state control. This was the case, for example, when the national government commissioned an evaluation of specific peacebuilding policies conducted in violent environments in Colombia (Nilsson, 2018). Although the report was circulated widely within the government, we were still free to publish without any restrictions.

Additional steps may be required to ensure access to diverse populations within a setting of violence. For example, when conducting research in a rather secluded, highly structured indigenous community in Cauca, we needed a formal introduction through a local network to the indigenous authorities. The latter arranged for a formal session where we as a team were introduced, informed about the community’s perspective on a number of issues, and questioned about our research, before officially welcoming us into the community. Only with this permission were we allowed to freely move around and conduct interviews. The blessing of the local indigenous authorities was central for our being able to complete this research.

Relatedly, research in vulnerable contexts should adopt local customs in terms of compensation (e.g., for participation, travel, or lost working time) as well as provide food or other means to make it possible for a wider range of participants to be interviewed. Although certain means of compensation may be acceptable in some settings, they may pose serious safety and ethical issues in others. For instance, in our other research with children and adolescents in North America or Europe, we often compensate our participants in monetary form. However, we were required to revaluate how we compensated participants when taking into account the contextual and economic factors defining the lives of adolescents from vulnerable backgrounds. More specifically, when conducting interviews in urban low-income Colombian schools (Restrepo, 2019), payment might have created an undue influence on their decisions to participate. Regular traveling with large sums of money would have also placed the research team at risk. Ultimately, participants were compensated with school cafeteria vouchers, thereby safeguarding their autonomy and voluntariness as well the research team’s security while traveling.

Some form of compensation, however, is often a simple matter of courtesy and reciprocity. For example, providing lunch for participants who have come from afar to a collective meeting place is often a sign of respect. Moreover, communities we have visited for research purposes have often arranged for lunch in our honor. In this light, to not reciprocate would display a severe lack of respect. Thus, researchers should anticipate these expenses, include them into their budgets, and consult local contacts on such matters. In one of our research trips (Nilsson & Taylor, 2017), focus group members previously planned to use their travel compensation for a collective community project. They coordinated their travel to/from the focus group to save costs, and the remaining support was applied to their local development objectives.

Finally, safety and care must be not only physical, but also psychological (Moss, Uluğ, & Acar, 2019). Working in conflict-affected societies, particularly conducting research with those hit hardest by the violence, can take a psychological toll on the research team. Building in time for individual and collective reflection, as well as rest and relaxation, is important to sustain the team. This team is not aware of a specific set of best practices or guidelines; therefore, reflecting on our own work, we offer a few examples that could be adapted by other researchers.

In other projects, we have set aside money for a nice dinner or special, small gifts for the local staff, often something they can share with their families or children. The goal was to recognise the multiple ways that they contributed to the project, while also forging human and peaceful relations among the team members. If possible, both local and international researchers may try to build in ‘recovery’ times before returning to their jobs after fieldwork. For example, one member on the team used to schedule flights to arrive Sunday night or Monday morning, immediately returning to family and work commitments. However, over the years, she has learned to try to book return trips to arrive on Friday, to have a full weekend before picking up other professional commitments. A final note, observed in other fields of practice, is to set away messages that span one day before and after the actual fieldwork. This small logistical decision may help to carve out much-needed breathing space after conducting research in conflict-affected environments.

**Working with Emerging Researchers from Local Contexts**

During our work, local collaborators have greatly contributed to the research. The research community in Colombia were well-trained and prepared. In Colombia, there are a number of leading research universities, and hosts of other strong institutions of higher education, that are open to partner with international investigators. Moreover, Colombia also has an incredible generation of young people who are committed to research for constructive social change. Working with these emerging researchers, we argue, is a critical contribution to the long-term sustainability of research and deepening societal impact.

For the purposes of this chapter, we define early career local researchers as undergraduates, postgraduates, or recent graduates.[[1]](#footnote-1) Although some plan to pursue life-long careers as scholars, others may opt for government-based positions or NGOs, to name a few. Our intention is not to exclude young populations already in the workforce or pursuing different career goals, but rather to highlight those actively seeking to engage in research. When partnering with early career scholars, we consider their familiarity with the research methodology and theoretical frameworks. Having previous experience with the communities of interest can also prove to be a useful asset, in addition to possessing valuable insider knowledge. Because of the complexity of working in protracted conflicts, the importance of local and lived knowledge may be particularly important in such settings.

**Nature of Engagement**

Power imbalances between experienced scholars and early-career researchers could be partly produced through differences in training and expertise. Regardless of the reasons why these imbalances may arise, a power-sharing culture should be fostered. That is, although early career researchers may still be developing their knowledge and understanding about theoretical and methodological aspects of the research, they often have equally valuable insider knowledge. However, we caution researchers not to limit the early career researchers’ involvement to tasks that involve practical, applied work, but also to offer opportunities in which their knowledge, perspective, and personal experiences may inform the more conceptual aspects of inquiry. In fact, our experience shows that taking along early career researchers on field research trips gives us an opportunity not only to train an emerging generation of researchers, but also to test and adjust our seasoned approaches to the continuously changing and dynamic context of doing research. Emergent researchers belong to a generation that was born into the technological revolution. Thus, they often have experience with the latest tools that might prove useful to doing research; for example, in another project, the early career researcher maintained continuous contact with participants through WhatsApp (Taylor, 2019). Researcher habits that have been tested through many years of field research nevertheless need constant adjustment and flexibility; partnering with early career researchers might just make that process easier.

**Level of Involvement**

The benefits afforded by consulting with early career scholars do not need to be derived from long-term engagement only. Their insight may be valuable at any point of the research and in different capacities. For instance, while collecting data on adolescents’ understandings of the 2016 Peace Accord (Restrepo, 2019), we collaborated with emerging researchers from local universities. This fieldwork took place in the midst of the 2018 presidential election that would determine the fate of the agreement with the FARC, as well as future peace negotiations with other armed groups. Although we had extensive knowledge of how the political discourse of each candidate challenged the peace process, we were unaware of how the political rhetoric penetrated the school environment. Through discussions with emerging researchers, who at the time were working and conducting research in different schools, we came to a deeper understanding of how and why the school personnel and parents would be unwilling to allow youth to collaborate on research tackling political issues. These conversations permitted us not only to navigate difficult situations with school staff regarding the non-partisanship of the research, but also helped us become more attuned with some of the challenges that political conflict poses to the research process. This type of diversity in the research skills and perspectives can be fostered when outsider researchers build an environment in which everyone’s input is welcomed and validated.

Related to power imbalances, the level of involvement of emerging researchers is a factor that should be actively considered. That is, although we recommend that a local perspective be involved from the planning stages to the dissemination of findings, this may be particularly challenging when working with early career scholars who are potentially juggling multiple jobs, different research venues, and/or still completing their education. Therefore, open conversations with emerging scholars at the initiation and throughout the project can assess the capacity and degree to which they would like to be involved, based on their expertise and work-life balance. One possibility is an explicit ‘trial period’ during the initial stages of involvement; that is, informing the research team that should recurrent circumstances leading to significant changes in the work hours and wages arise, there is the possibility for adjustment. Although, these points are not unique to conflict and post-accord settings, it may be exacerbated in contexts experiencing economic difficulties.

Another key factor to consider is that emerging local researchers may not have the same time as experienced researchers; long-term commitments may be limited as they might move on to pursue their career path. Therefore, consulting with early career researchers regarding their level of involvement becomes ever so important when long-term commitments are needed for the benefit of the inquiry. Seasoned scholars should also consider that, as emerging researchers learn and gain insight into the inquiry at hand, the nature of their engagement can be adapted. Allowing them to participate in increasingly complex tasks in the course of a single project provides a rich opportunity for early career researchers to become familiar with the inquiry in a way that is closer to the seasoned scholars’ understanding.

**Compensation**

With regards to compensation, we would like to highlight that the power imbalance may be exacerbated in cases where emerging local researchers are paid by the outsider researcher’s funding. Tensions may arise inasmuch as local researchers do not feel comfortable discussing unpaid hours and appropriate wages. Although, to our knowledge, this has not been the case in our previous working relationships with emerging local researchers, we remain conscious of the dynamics that paid research positions may bring. As with level of involvement, encouraging open and on-going conversations about wages can be a way to address any issues that may arise. For instance, in our own research, we asked the local researchers to keep a record of their hours. However, we noticed that there could be misunderstandings of what a ‘billable hour’ represents, especially around the travel time related to data collection. In North America, our early career researchers would begin recording their hours upon arrival to the laboratory or the participant’s house, inasmuch as the traveling distance was similar to the distance between their home and the university. However, this rule-of-thumb was not as useful in Bogotá, where the travel time would often double or triple during peak hours. Because of this reality, we believed that it was important to reconsider the meaning of a ‘billable hour’ in a way that was fair to both the emerging researcher and the leading researcher.

Furthermore, in Colombia, working with emerging researchers is plagued by under-funded public educational institutions. Compared to Western universities, it is far more difficult to receive research funding or scholarships in public Colombian universities, which are merit-based. Therefore, under-funded students are expected to maintain excellent academic records, while possibly struggling to make ends meet. This means that a large portion of students, for example, may work in multiple jobs unrelated to their fields of research. They may also need to pay out of pocket for certain research expenses (e.g., photocopies, snacks for participants). Adjusting budgets to help cover these costs for emerging local scholars may be an important step to offer them crucial learning opportunities.

Relatedly, there might be differences in the salary scales for research assistantships. That is, undergraduate, masters, and doctoral students often fall under different pay rates, and these might differ between universities and across countries. It is also possible that certain universities do not have clear-cut salary scales for these positions. In these cases, we recommend that the aforementioned considerations, as well as other contextual issues, be taken into account when evaluating how much a local researcher should be paid.

If emerging local researchers are recruited for non-paid positions, it is important that their efforts be recognized in other ways, such as authorship, acknowledgements, and/or use of the data for their own projects. Additionally, including emerging researchers as authors into publication is often a not to be underestimated incentive for emerging researchers (Taylor et al., 2016). Emerging researchers can take over a number of tasks in a research project that more than merits their inclusion as authors and also makes them feel that they are part of the team. Our experience is also that the prospect of inclusion as authors in research projects is an excellent incentive for emerging researchers. Moreover, emphasizing transferrable skills, such training in interviewing techniques or data analysis, and offering to write letters of recommendations may benefit their future careers outside of the scope of the project.

**Early Career Capacity Building**

While including emerging researchers in the inquiry process provides a number of opportunities for new perspectives to be heard, their presence may call for additional training, thereby affecting timeframes and financial resources. In cases where the primary research team resides abroad, and data collection time is limited, it may not only be challenging, but also impossible to provide in-person guidance and training to the local team. In our experience, technological advances have facilitated training via online meetings and fostered communication via texting and telephone conversations. However, it is important for researchers to be mindful that local early career researchers residing or conducting work in remote areas may not always have access to reliable internet connections.

Furthermore, for research protocols with defined guidelines (e.g., structured or semi-structured interviews, interventions), in-person training may still be necessary prior to the beginning of data collection. For instance, when conducting research with urban Colombian youth, we conducted mock interviews during which the young researcher with whom we collaborated was allowed to raise concerns and questions with real-time feedback from the principal investigator. The personal interactions were valuable learning experiences which also helped to identify potential issues that could arise. Additionally, emerging researchers accompanying field trips can also have an observer period first and then conduct interviews under the observation of more experienced researchers. In the end, this would allow for the learning process to continue and would provide future opportunities to send emerging researchers into the field to complete outstanding field research.

**Dissemination and Impact**

The dissemination of findings to communities and non-academic audiences can sometimes be limited and difficult when the research has been conducted in post-accord settings and/or areas with ongoing violence. Policy briefs and publications in academic journals will often not reach the concerned communities. Emerging researchers, however, may be positioned to bring new skills and ideas to dissemination, for example, through podcasts, art, social media, popular newsletters, film making, or other creative media (Cooke & Soria-Donlan, 2017; Kelly & Flower, 2018). Moreover, while seasoned researchers may have better access to certain actors, structures, and information, emerging researchers may facilitate access to new information networks. Related to the section on participatory research, allowing early career scholars to take ownership of their work and involvement in research enables them to create and document methods and tools that allow for bottom-up change. Bridging the gap between academia and local communities requires a continuous reflexive process that, ultimately, should strive to encourage people to find their own voice and fight for change. Our research cooperation with emerging researchers in Colombia has proven indispensable for the progress of the project.

Relatedly, it is of even greater importance to include emerging scholars in research carried out in contexts where the burden of change lies upon their shoulders. In the 2016 Peace Accord, many voices were excluded, including the generation charged with carrying forward the recommendations. Despite active participation in campaigns, discussions, and mobilization, the younger generation did not have a seat at the negotiating table. As part of this excluded segment, youth were not allowed to share their experiences and viewpoints, either as victims or as future peacebuilders. In a post-accord generation, including youth researchers strengthens processes of social reconstruction (McEvoy-Levy, 2006; Taylor & McKeown, 2017). Empowering evidence-based grassroots initiatives has the potential to open up the doors to academia to future generations, while also creating meaningful change.

**Contextual Language Skills**

Finally, working with early career researchers also yields some of the benefits of collaboration with those local actors at any career stage. Here we emphasize what we have learned in our work with young people in Colombia. First, during a group discussion with fellow postgraduates in Colombia, the junior co-author in this chapter realized that despite being young in appearance and of Colombian origin, she would not be able to carry out the interviews in the same way as her counterparts who had lived their lives and conducted their studies in Colombia. While fluent in Spanish, the inflections in her accent, as well as the lack of knowledge of certain expressions and slang,created different dynamics within the interview process that were closer to the outsider-insider relationship. It was a noteworthy experience when one of her fellow colleagues mentioned approaching his participants in colloquial, friend-like ways, often using local expressions to relate to them. This style of interacting with participants not only seemed appropriate within the confines of the relationship that the interviewer had developed with the interviewees, but it also appeared utterly natural for him to act this way. Ultimately, we discovered that when the research topic explores difficult subjects, such as violence and victimhood, informal interactions may allow for interviewees to open up to the research team and generate deeper dialogue. In other words, especially when working with local youth, being able to draw from shared understandings and promote trust may be easier for early career insider researchers.

Second, in our work with youth in Colombia, early career researchers’ familiarity may assist with the adaptation of research tools (e.g., questionnaires, interview guides). In addition to identifying words that may be misinterpreted, they are also in a position to provide insight into expressions and practices familiar to local participants. For instance, colloquial expressions and words in Spanish often carry double meanings, depending on the context. Therefore, while in one situation ‘*guayabo’* may mean hangover, it may signify nostalgia in another one. Understanding these subtle differences in language facilitated our work, particularly when designing and translating our measures from English to Spanish.

Third, in this line of research we devised hypothetical peer conflict scenarios that we used to evaluate youths’ reasoning about harm (Restrepo & Recchia, 2019). To make each scenario as relatable as possible to adolescents’ experiences at school, we needed to understand intricate contextual details and cultural practices that were unique to the lives of youth. Although we had previously designed a number of vignettes based on our understanding of Latin American schools, their content drastically changed once we consulted the early career researchers with whom we collaborated. For instance, we were unable to use a scenario of a conflict occurring in the school’s gymnasium because many public schools in Bogotá do not have access to those facilities. We also designed an entirely new vignette based on a practical joke common in Colombian schools called the ‘*empanada’* (a trick wherein a student’s backpack is turned inside out). Additionally, although this practice is fairly common in schools across the country, its name varied depending on the region; for example, students in schools in the north coast called it ‘*tamal*.*’* Ultimately, beyond helping us understand the intricacies in language and daily lives of youth in Bogotá, the emerging researchers’ insight permitted us to adapt our protocol to conduct culturally sensitive research.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter we have shared insights from our experiences conducting field research in Colombia amid ongoing violence. However, this reflection is not exhaustive; rather, we hoped to provide current and future researchers with a departure point for discussion about the theoretical, ethical, and practical considerations when working across conflict-affected societies. Our discussion about safety issues, empowerment, and underlying power dynamics highlights how research success in violent settings is largely determined by the strength of collaboration with local networks. Partnerships between established and early career researchers, between academics and grassroots actors, and across different disciplines and sectors are not only practical in value (e.g., accessing communities), but also have the potential to empower communities, which is critical in conflict and post-conflict areas. With the aim of conducting research that may influence long-term peacebuilding in settings of violence, we hope these reflections may inform future engaged research in Colombia and globally.

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1. We recognize that there may be additional challenges and best practices when working with emerging local researchers who are not affiliated with universities, but do not have first-hand experience to draw on for this chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)