

# Challenges for a North American Doing Research with Traditional Indigenous Guatemalan Midwives

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***Abstract:** The purpose to this article is to narratively explore the process of doing research in a transcultural setting. The research project was an ethnographic design using the method of participant observation. The setting was the highlands of Guatemala, and the participants were traditional indigenous midwives with a divine mandate to practice. Using the experience of the research process, the author makes recommendations to future student researchers.*

***Keywords:** ethnography, Guatemala, indigenous, midwives*

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## Author's note

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The ferry cut through the water as the light faded slowly from the sky overhead. I stood at the rail outside, looking for San Pedro la Laguna. I had caught the 5 p.m. boat, the last ferry that leaves Panajachel for San Pedro. Now, watching the waters of Lake Atitlán curl back from the prow of the boat, I found it difficult to contain my excitement at finally beginning my first fieldwork project. It was a moment of achievement, the culmination of a year of planning and frustration, and I was happy. I looked at the people around me and wondered who lived in San Pedro. There were women dressed in patterned acrylic blouses and long skirts made of the heavy cotton material typical to Guatemala. Their long, dark hair was braided or caught up in a plastic barrette. Older women had their braids wound up on their heads, intertwined with strips of brightly colored cotton. There were men dressed in polyester shirts and pants. Many carried machetes at their sides. Older men, too, carried machetes but wore shirts made of red-patterned cotton and calf-length, striped, white shorts with colorful designs embroidered between the stripes. There were children sitting quietly, birdlike, watching what was going on around them. Several babies either slept in a rebozo (a length of brightly patterned cotton that served as both baby sling and as shawl for the mother) or sucked on an unabashedly exposed breast.

I wondered what secrets I would learn from the Indigenous. They were the inheritors of the great Mayan civilization, alive and vibrant still in the highlands of Guatemala. They were far removed from the concrete-bound, fast-paced, technology-driven existence of my homeland. I had learned, through university courses, “new age” books, and television documentaries that buried in the traditions of Indigenous peoples lay the secret to something that modern society has lost. I had learned that women, in particular older women, were wise and respected. I had learned that some ancient truth existed in the pure, simple lives of the Indigenous living in villages such as the one at the foot of the San Pedro volcano. I wanted to know about this life; I wanted to come into direct contact with the mysteries of existence that had been lost in a world of mass production, hypermarketed products, and government cutbacks.

It was dark now, and I could feel the chill of the breeze through my wool sweater. I stepped around the *costales* (bundles of goods hidden under typical cloth and held together with twine-mesh bags) that were heaped together on the floor at the back of the boat. Entering the covered part of the ferry, I was protected from the wind, and I sat down on one of the metal seats. Two women were seated in front of me, engrossed in an animated conversation in Tz’utuhil, the dialect of

Quiché-Maya spoken in San Pedro. Are they midwives? I wondered.

My research question centered on the work of traditional midwives in San Pedro la Laguna. I had designed a study in which the methods of investigation were participant observation and interview. Although each of these methods could be used separately, I agreed with Kirby and McKenna (1989) that a “combination of participation and observation is optimal” (p. 80). Living in San Pedro would make me an active participant in the context in which my subjects lived. This aspect would be enriched for me, as I needed to earn my living there, right alongside the Indigenous people. I was intent on observing first-hand the activities of the midwife and then interviewing the wise woman about these activities. I was confident that such a person existed, that I would find her, and that I would learn very profound things from her. The things that I learned are chronologically ordered in this article through the use of subheadings that reflect the stages of fieldwork as outlined by Shaffir, Stebbins, and Turowetz (1980) in their book *Fieldwork Experience: Qualitative Approaches to Social Research*.

My enjoyment of the ambiance in which I found myself was ruptured by the angry voice of a young man with unkempt, light curly hair and a dirty T-shirt. “Six quetzals [Guatemalan currency]?” he snarled in fluent Spanish, “Three quetzals! Everybody knows the price here! Why do you want to rob the Gringos? [Literally, *Gringo* means American, but it generally refers to anyone with White features]. I won’t pay that price!” He was standing in the isle, a head or so above the Indigenous man standing in front of him. The Indigenous man turned around and walked out the other way, shaking his head. The Gringo man sat beside his companion, and they spoke angrily together in English. Two other Indigenous men came to the rescue of the unfortunate fare collector. One leaned across the isle and tried to reason calmly with the unruly Whites: “That’s the price. That’s been the price for several years . . .” “Yes,” chimed in the other, “that is the fare for everybody . . .” The belligerent men snapped something hotly back at them, and the Indigenous men shrugged indifferently, closing themselves off and settling themselves back in their seats. I was embarrassed. I wished desperately that my skin was not White. I did not want to be associated with that image, the image of the arrogant conqueror who aggressively and wantonly squelches out all voices but his own. I prided myself on having the “right” attitude toward Indigenous people: I knew that these people had been unrightfully conquered and their culture unmercifully stripped from them; I was concerned about this and felt that the wrongs of the past needed to be righted. I felt that In-

digenous culture needed to be promoted and recognized for its intrinsic value. I recognized Indigenous persons by their physical characteristics and took pains to treat each one with extra respect and courtesy. Suddenly, the fare collector was standing in front of me. I handed him the Q6 that he asked for, feeling virtuous.

The boat was slowing down, pulling in alongside a wooden pier. I got up and went out to the rail to scrutinize the string of lights that went up the hill from the pier. "Is this San Pedro la Laguna?" I asked someone beside me, for I, too, spoke Spanish fluently. "No, it's Santa Cruz," came the reply. "Ah, thank you," I mumbled as the Guatemalans do, looking off at the lights and trying to appear as un-Gringa-like as possible.

After that, the stops were frequent. At each one, I inquired if this was San Pedro, but it was San Marcos, then it was Tz'ununá, then San Pablo. As the boat crossed the bay from San Pablo, the lights of San Pedro grew larger as the ferry neared its destination. San Pedro was much larger than any of the ports at which the boat had stopped after leaving Panajachel. I stayed outside now, shivering as the wind whipped my hair across my face. This is it, I thought. This is it! I could see the great, dark hulk of the volcano rising up behind the lights of the town. I scrutinized the lights twinkling under the black sky of the new moon, wondering, imagining the lives of the people who lived there. Then I was walking up the long, steep hill that leads away from the pier. Indigenous people said hello as I passed. I thought to myself as I panted under the weight of my knapsack, "This is such a nice town!" I was not prepared, at that point, to acknowledge that there are two sides to every coin. Nor was I prepared to confront the idea, eloquently elicited by veteran anthropologist Barley (1988), that group characteristics, identified by external features such as Indigenous or White, tend to flatten out the group into "a people" and push aside the internal characteristics of individuals.

### Getting in

Shaffir, Stebbens, and Turowetz (1980) stated that "library, documentary, and bibliographic research are critical elements of . . . [preparatory research]: they shape the researcher's sampling procedures and preparations for interviewing" (p. 25). I had discovered in my literature search that a woman named Lois Paul had worked extensively with midwives in San Pedro la Laguna until her death in 1975. A careful study of her work had provided me with a solid historical basis from which to develop specific interview questions. I did not have to spend months trying to get a handle on the way in which traditional midwives work in San Pedro, because it had been done before, particularly by

Paul. Instead, I started from her stopping point, validating the continuance of such practices as she had described and observing changes. Her husband, Dr. Benjamin Paul, is a Stanford anthropologist who has spent more than 50 years doing research on social change in San Pedro la Laguna and who continues to do so. I had written to him during the preparatory phase of my research, and he had responded promptly with interest, information, and an indication that he anticipated being in San Pedro at the time that I would be beginning my fieldwork. Had I not done an extensive literature review of my topic before venturing into the field, I suspect that I would have spent much more of my time in San Pedro trying to "get in."

The next morning, I bounced out of bed, eager to get started. I walked up the steep hill from the hotel to the market in the center of town, and I immediately began asking for Dr. Paul. I asked a woman sitting on the street behind some mangos spread over a plastic sheet. She shifted the child sucking at her breast and pondered the question, offering some vague suggestions as to where I might find the professor. I continued asking everyone and anyone as I walked through town. I eventually found myself in front of a well-kept, nicely finished cement house. A neatly groomed man was outside, talking to a young boy. I asked for Dr. Paul. "Ah, Don Paul!" exclaimed the man, using the respectful Spanish term of Don (Doña for a woman),

He's one of my good friends! He is not here now, he's written to my son and he won't be able to come here until July . . . Oh, you are an anthropologist? Well, when Don Paul is here he stays with Doña Elvira.<sup>1</sup> Her daughter Ester runs the restaurant *El Pintor*, just down the hill there, on the left.

I was disappointed that I would not meet Dr. Paul but happy to have my first lead.

The wrought iron gate that separated *El Pintor* from the street was open, and I crossed a tiny grass lawn into what was probably intended to be the living room of the tidy cement house. There were five matching kitchen table and chair sets in the room, and I seated myself noisily at one of them. There did not seem to be anyone about. Then a girl came into the room, and I ordered lunch. I quickly learned that the Potoks, the family with whom Dr. Paul lodges, have had many researchers stay in the quarters that they have available for rent. Ester promptly offered to introduce me to the traditional midwives of San Pedro after I moved my things from the hotel to my new habitation.

It was just after 1 p.m. when I finished moving and Ester's children had arrived home from school. "I'm

very sorry, but I can't go with you now," she informed me regretfully, "but my sister-in-law will take you." Erika lived in the room beside us with her two small children. Her husband, Ester's brother, worked in Guatemala city, returning only on weekends. Together we mounted the hill to the center of town, and Erika led me to the quarters of Doña Ascunción, one of the traditional midwives. In a letter to me, Dr. Paul had indicated that there were probably four traditional midwives; I quickly discovered, however, that one was very old and quite ill. Doña Ascunción was not in. "She's rarely in," commented Erika, "she's very busy with her work." We continued on to the adobe house of Doña Ida. Erika introduced us, then slipped away. Doña Ida dismissed me almost immediately, saying that she could not speak Spanish and that her clients did not want anyone accompanying her.

That evening, as I was eating dinner at *El Pintor*, Ester's husband, Chepe, came to meet us. I told him of Doña Ida's reaction to me. He said, smiling ruefully,

Oh, that's because people here don't have confidence in people they don't know. The Indigenous people here have learned that it is better to just keep quiet and not get involved. It's not that they don't want to help you or that they're not interested, it's just that they don't trust you. Rebecca [Ester's sister] will go with you and introduce your project to Doña Rosario.

It was dark when we again climbed the hill to the center of town. Inside Doña Rosario's two-room house, we were cordially seated on child-size wooden chairs, and Rebecca explained my project to the woman in Tz'utuhil. She stressed that I was not going to make a report of all the things that the traditional midwife does wrong, nor was I going to set up my own practice and become part of her competition (although there are only four traditional midwives in San Pedro, there are many new midwives, making competition for business stiff). She mentioned Don Paul, and Doña Rosario remembered his wife, Doña Luisa. Doña Rosario spoke fluent Spanish and was quite sociable.

I visited Doña Rosario several times, each time bringing her an offering of a pound of chicken, tomatoes, onions, potatoes, and cilantro. She commented once that I was visiting her *cada rato*—every minute. Finally, I interviewed her. A particular challenge that I was not prepared for, and was to note again with the third midwife, was that she was neither able really to articulate her experience nor to reflect on and express what she thought about that experience. Doña Rosario, too, commented that her clients would not accept someone being with her. I was becoming discouraged at this point, thinking that I was not going to accomplish what I had hoped to do with my project. I had hoped to become an apprentice to one midwife, to have

her take me under her wing and to learn from the wealth of knowledge that she had acquired from her years of experience. In effect, I was experiencing the estrangement described by Hammersley and Atkinson (1995): Everyday life in the community of San Pedro was not laid out like a textbook, and my "Rousseau-like" expectations were quickly eroding.

It was after I had worked with Doña Rosario for some time that I asked Rebecca to introduce me to the third midwife, Doña Ascunción. Doña Ascunción spoke only Tz'utuhil, but when I came alone to interview her, armed with my usual food offering, she had her nephew there to translate for me. I unfortunately failed to operate my tape recorder correctly and the interview was not taped (another methodological challenge!). A week later, I went to her house to redo this interview as we had arranged, but she was at a delivery. I was taken there and admitted in. A baby girl was delivered. The family was very poor, and at Doña Ascunción's suggestion, I bought clothes for the baby: diapers, an undershirt, a sweater, and booties. When I went to Doña Ascunción's house sometime later to redo the interview, I brought her a silver necklace for disturbing her with this interview again, and because I was grateful for having been admitted into a delivery when the others had been so reluctant to permit this. She told me then that the family had given the baby girl both her name and my name. I found out much later that that meant I was supposed to be the baby's benefactor.

### Learning the ropes

Learning the ropes was, for me, one of the most challenging parts of my fieldwork. The challenge was related to two specific areas: (a) adapting to relatively poor living conditions and (b) an awareness of, and my feelings about, the ways in which Whites are stereotyped by groups toward whom many Whites pride themselves on their benevolence.

Living conditions were, relatively speaking, poor. Poor living conditions are tolerable, for me, for a week or so. It was a continual challenge to adapt to such conditions over a period of several months. Water, for example, arrived in San Pedro every three days for about 2 hours in the early morning—when the pipe to the town wasn't broken. The water apparently came from the mountains. It certainly felt cold enough when I scooped bowlfuls out of the *pila* (large cement sink) and poured them tentatively over parts of my body to bathe. One time, someone from San Pedro's sizable hippie population passed by me muttering, for my amusement, in a thick British accent, "A nice hot bath,

that's what I'd like. A nice hot bath." I could sympathize.

Spaghetti, chicken, and eggs are found on the menus of all Pedrano restaurants. The latter two dishes are frequently accompanied by rice, beans, sliced tomatoes and onions, and tortillas or bread. Restaurants consist of several kitchen tables and chairs in a cement room. Sometimes there is a picture or two on the wall. It's just not the same, somehow, eating refried beans in Mexicali Rosa's (a restaurant) in Ottawa and eating refried beans in Latin America.

As usual for me in the tropics, I was frequently ill. I acquired diarrhea every 2 or 3 weeks, and contracted some sort of skin infection, a tooth infection, and, the *coup de grace*, hepatitis. Generally these illnesses went untreated, as I had to pay for a consultation and then for several unknown medicines. It was a little scary being sick, because there were no information sheets available, and I could not go to the library to look things up. It was then, when I was ill, that I found the slapping sound of women making tortillas and the smell of maize cooking over a wood fire repugnant. Walking along certain streets in which the daytime heat brought out the stench of corners that were stained with the darkened reminders of where people urinated nauseated me. The conversations of people passing—"damelo maa-ma" . . . "buenos dias" . . . "oostawatch nan"—made me dizzy. I did not want to look at the woman who just spat a great yellow gob onto the street. I did not want to see the boy stretched out, drunk, on the sidewalk beside the cantina (bar). I did not want to see where the sex workers were, and, furthermore, I did not want any more fried chicken with rice and beans. I longed for the soda biscuits and Cheez Whiz that my mother used to give me when I was sick.

I had little money and relied heavily on selling the silver and semiprecious stones that I had brought from Mexico. I set up a small table on the long, large hill that is the main street of San Pedro, joining the three local vendors that were already there. I would sit for hours, daily at first, and not make a single quetzal. It was hot, and dusty too, when the wind stirred up the dirt. Roberto, the son of Doña Rosario and the father of one of the girls that sold typical goods on the street, commented often to me that "life here needs patience." Shaffir et. al. (1980) noted that the researcher must spend a lot of time "just hanging around" (p. 113). The boredom of the long periods of unaccustomed inactivity, combined with my innate impatience, made hanging around sometimes difficult to bear.

A fact of life in San Pedro la Laguna was poverty. The Pedranos seemed generally able to scrape together the cost of transportation to better markets for selling,

food, lodging, and typical clothes. These were the basics of subsistence. Many people seemed also to be able to acquire televisions. Cameras, film development, airplanes (17% federal tax plus Q50 airport tax), cars, and fine restaurants were at least as expensive as in Canada and thus were unaffordably priced for the majority of people that I met in San Pedro.

"It's not like when I was a child," Doña Elvira commented to me once, "now people have ways to make money." But there were still children gnawing on left-over bones in an open-air restaurant, a constant supply of skinny, mangy dogs staring woefully up at me as I guiltily ate, and a cute little kitten that lived near me that was fed only coffee and masa (cornmeal). Of course I know, I told myself, that if people cannot eat, certainly animals are not going to eat. I was relieved when I saw a tourist walk by one day with a big, healthy German Shepherd padding along at his side. I was beginning to lose my perspective on things, forgetting that there are other ways to live besides sitting on an empty street peddling things that few people can afford, living in one cement room, and bathing with bowlfuls of ice cold water.

I was far removed from an environment where people visited museums, discussed international events, or sat in cafés sipping café latté. I had an instamatic camera with me, which I hid as much as possible in San Pedro. I felt awkward at possessing such a superfluous and costly item. Later, when I went to an Italian café in the beautiful colonial town of Antigua Guatemala I hid my camera as much as possible. It seemed too rudimentary alongside the videorecorders and the bags of lenses for expensive 35 mm cameras that hung at the sides of Guatemalan nationals and foreign tourists.

I was in Antigua Guatemala, that time, with Doña Elvira. We went together to visit the ruins of the convent La Merced. As we climbed crumbling stairs and walked down a long corridor bordered by huge stone arches, Doña Elvira, a Mayan Indigenous, commented, "Ah, the Mayans were amazing people." I was not surprised at her comment. None of the Mayan midwives knew who Ix-Chel, the Mayan god of childbirth, was either. "It's not Mayan, Doña," I responded, "it's colonial Spanish."

There were many incongruencies between my romantic image and the reality of what "Indigenous" was there in San Pedro. For example, walking up the street in San Pedro la Laguna, I was more likely to hear Led Zeppelin, Gloria Trevi, or Bob Marley tunes wafting from cement houses than to hear the pan flute or marimba that I associated with Guatemala. This was disappointing. I began to recognize that my image of Indigenous peoples had been rather limited, shaped as it was by sources that filtered out all but those voices

that spoke of the traditional ways. I had placed Indigenous peoples on a pedestal, as a symbol of a lost utopia and of my guilt of sharing the same skin color as those held responsible for the demise of the paradise that existed in the New World before the conquest. I began to see that the propagandized identity of Indigenous was largely congruent with the White idea of what they should be.

What was also rather disconcerting were the stereotypes that people had of me. For example, I am White, and therefore I am rich, and therefore I can pay more than the going market value. For example, boat fare from San Pedro la Laguna across the lake to Panajachel cost Q3.00, but a minimum of Q6.00 was exacted from non-Indigenous people. Tourists wishing to visit San Pedro from the tourist town or Panajachel were extorted Q12.00 or Q15.00. It was always a fight for me to get on the boat, for I, as had the biligerent Gringos that I had so painfully noted on my arrival, refused to pay Gringo prices. The result was that I went to Panajachel as infrequently as possible.

One day, I watched a young boy displaying the articles that he was carrying for sale to an elderly tourist. The woman did not seem particularly interested in his wares, but she spoke to him in broken Spanish, making general comments on how nice the town was and how pretty his things were. A Guatemalan friend laughed, remarking that the boy was not at all interested in engaging her in conversation. He just wanted her to spend some of her money.

Boys lamented that I was already married, short-circuiting any designs they entertained of cutting through the red tape of going to Canada (equated with the United States), where they could earn \$6 an hour. People seemed to prefer to receive American dollars over Guatemalan currency. How ironic, I thought, that they seek a utopia in my country, whereas I seek it in theirs . . . In Canada, that is, the United States, they thought, they could buy a car and live the good material life that all Gringos live. It was money, not culture, that interested them. When I told people how much it cost me to pay my basic monthly expenses in Canada, they were shocked. I do not think they believed me. Furthermore, I would add if in a sufficiently petulant mood, given the current economic climate in Canada what type of job, if any, did they expect to get when they spoke neither English nor French and had high school (or less) education? Furthermore, despite public efforts to sensitize the population to the issue, racism continues to be a subtle (or not-so-subtle) element in many working and living environments in Canada. There are two sides to every coin, everywhere.

The stereotypes were not limited to White versus Indigenous. They were also White versus White. For

example, a middle-class tourist paused briefly at my table on the street only to exclaim, "What are *you* doing here? You're not Mayan!" "It's a multicultural country," I retorted, shocked. He turned away shaking his head and muttering audibly, "Ah, the lost generation." Some time after that event, I called out "hello" to a young woman who, I had been told, was an NGO (nongovernmental organization) worker. Standing at least a meter from my wares—probably not wanting to be associated with a rootless hippie (after all, who else would set up a table to sell on the street?), she informed me that she had a master's degree in public health. Then, after having made her position clear and without inquiring, even politely, after my business in San Pedro, she whirled around and continued up the hill. She never again looked toward my table, and I never made the effort to say hello to her again.

### Maintaining relations

One evening, I sat at *El Pintor* talking idly with Chepe. "Am I Ladina?" I asked abruptly. Chepe looked surprised as he replied, "No, no I don't think so . . . why?" I was relieved at his surprise. In Mexico, to be called Ladino is very derogatory, as the term refers to people who do not treat you well. Chepe explained,

There's really only one family here that is Ladino, they don't have anything to do with the Indigenous people. There is no trust between us. Their three children married people from Chichicastenango, Panajachel and Guatemala; not from here. Whenever they have a party or something, they don't invite Indigenous. If you came to live here and had this attitude, then you would be Ladina.

I thought about that for a minute. I had learned through my preparatory work that all persons, regardless of race, who did not practice Indigenous customs were Ladino. "Well then, what am I?" I demanded. "A foreigner," replied Chepe simply.

Maintaining relations largely required the usual social graces, such as saying "hello," "do you mind if . . .," "thank you," and "good-bye." Shaffir et al. have argued (1980) against taking sides in a dispute. I tried to stay neutral in disputes, but it was not always easy.

In mid-March, now relatively intergrated into Pedrano life, I returned from a short trip to several larger centers, where I was able to sell some of my goods. As I turned from the dusty beachfront trail onto the street where the vendors were, I knew that something had happened. Lupe had moved down the street,

farther away from the entrance of San Pedro's cleanest hotel. Lupe wasn't there, only a young child who professed not to know anything about anything. I walked on to Sonia's table. It was located exactly at Lupe's old spot, only it was no longer merely a table and a few bamboo racks tied together with string but a sizable, open-faced, roofed cabin. Her merchandise was displayed attractively around the walls, hung from racks, and spread over a low table. "Oh yes," she replied to my query, "this is new. In three days we put it up." I wondered what the story was. Later that night, I commented to Ester about Lupe's new location. She told me that her uncle owned the land on which Sonia's structure had been erected. Sonia had complained to the uncle about how meanly Ana (Lupe's sister) treated Sonia. The result was that Lupe was not permitted to sell in front of the hotel (which belonged to his brother), and Sonia was permitted to build the cabin. I knew that Ana was abrupt at times. I also knew how shrewd Sonia was; I remembered how insistent she was that I sell beside her, on the side farthest from Lupe. I thought of how she would rush to my table when I appeared to be selling something. When her friends were at my table, interested in some item or other, she would tell them, in Tz'utuhil, what my lowest price had been on that item. I knew this because numbers were most often spoken in Spanish. The evening of my return, I went to see Doña Rosario. I commented to her that I had seen Lupe's (her son Roberto's daughter) new location. "Yes," she said, looking me in the eye and patting her heart, "people have hate." I nodded sympathetically, "*envidia*" (*envidia* is a kind of jealousy, or envy, of material things). She nodded, knowing that I had understood.

One day I was seated on the low stone wall that bordered the street where my table was, talking to three children who were touching everything and buying nothing. "What is this?" one asked, pointing to a carved pendant painted in the bright colors of a tiger's face. "Oh, it's to put on a piece of leather like this—" I turned to show him the other necklaces hanging behind me on a tree. Only they weren't there. I realized with a horrible, sinking feeling that I had failed to collect them in my haste to pack up the day before. "They're gone," I said, quietly. Gone. I felt that that was the last I would ever see of them. I referred to my inventory. More than Q1,000 of goods had been hanging on that tree. Oh no. It could not be possible. Somehow, a small crowd gathered to discuss my loss. They talked about how I could go to the municipal offices and offer a sizable reward for their return. A very young boy came and joined them. Everyone was speaking excitedly in Tz'utuhil. I was desolate. The three children turned to me, jumping up and down. "If we find them, will you

give us a reward?" I felt a faint glimmer of hope. "Yes!" I cried, "yes!! Just find them!" They ran off promptly. One of the women spoke to me, telling me that the young boy had seen the daughter of the lame woman who sold not far from me farther up the hill take them yesterday afternoon. I waited and waited. Finally the boys came running back, panting that yes, indeed, Rosa had the necklaces, but she wouldn't give them to the boys. I moved my table closer to Sonia's cabin and went with the boys to the school where Rosa was selling. Rosa did have my necklaces, tied neatly with a shred of plastic and stored carefully in a box. She related the whole story to me of how she had seen them and had sent her daughter to retrieve them. She explained to me in great detail, with several examples, of how honest she was and how she had taken them as a favor to me. I listened politely, thinking that she was never going to hand me those necklaces. As we left the school the boys had a different story to tell of Rosa's honesty, but they were chiefly interested in their reward. No one seemed to have any change, so I went to *El Pintor* and Ester provided me with sufficient change and an indication of an appropriate reward. "A favor," she explained indignantly, "is when you retrieve something for someone and then give it back to them. You don't wait for them to come and get it." I did not really care. I was just so relieved to have my means to my livelihood back. When I saw Rosa at her table on the street again, I gave her a pair of earrings, and she seemed pleased with that.

### Leaving the field

I knocked on Doña Asunción's door. I had not eaten in two days. I had retched during most of the 4-hour climb up the San Pedro volcano the day before. My abdomen was painful. I wanted to go to a bigger center, where there was adequate medical care; I was scared, and I wanted to know what was wrong with my body. I had come to visit Doña Asunción and Doña Rosario to say goodbye and to take each of their photos to send back to them as I had promised. Doña Asunción expressed her dismay that I was leaving earlier than planned, and Doña Rosario gave me a cloth to wrap tortillas in.

At 5:30 the next morning, I was ready to leave San Pedro. Chepe found a young boy to carry my knapsack to the pier. I sat miserably waiting for the ferry, focusing on my pain as Chepe spoke with the fare collector on my behalf. I felt deeply disappointed in knowing that I was not going to be in San Pedro until the date that I had planned to leave, still 2 weeks away. "Your eyes are yellow," a Gringa from San Pedro commented sympathetically. Despite the number of times that I had

been to Latin America, I still was not strong enough and tough enough to weather the physical conditions successfully. I turned away, fighting the tears of frustration that stung my eyes.

### Final reflection

Most of the things that I experienced in San Pedro la Laguna initially registered on me emotionally as events or situations that produced anger or sadness. Confronting my journal and trying to express, coherently, what I was experiencing was, and is, challenging, and even then, the best I could do is articulate issues; I had no pragmatic responses to some of the difficult conditions of life in San Pedro (Geertz, 2000).

The methodological challenges that I encountered in the field had surprisingly little to do with my subjects. Rather, they seemed to group themselves around two main poles: physical challenges and attitudinal challenges.

The physical reality of living in another culture has opened up an area of further research that is of interest to persons going out into their first fieldwork experience. NGOs and government groups frequently have some sort of orientation to the field, as well as some type of support available to their workers in the field. For example, the American Peace Corps provides 3 months of daily Spanish lessons, technical training (such as preparing family plots), cultural orientation (films, speakers), and so on. I suggest that a fieldwork course, in which the final paper would be the submission to the ethics committee, would provide an ideal forum in which to examine one's expectations, learn about the culture, and make specific study preparations.

The American Peace Corps support includes full medical and dental coverage (including checkups and guidance when leaving and when returning from the field), living accommodations, and a small stipend commensurate with the local cost of living. They also have personnel located in Guatemala. Although the first three points of this support system might be covered by a research grant, perhaps the fourth, contact with the homeland, could be fulfilled with regular scheduled calls to the fieldwork advisor.

Immersion in another culture provides an opportunity to reflect on the "Canadian" way of being. Such reflection tends to heighten my awareness of the ways in which my mode of expression is often stereotypically English Canadian! Cultural differences, which are frequently more subtle than it would first appear, make it challenging to try to fit in, and force me to define with increasing clarity who I am, both as part of a cultural group and as distinct from it.

Attitudinal changes relate in particular to my perceptual shift from romanticism to realism. Dr. Harriett Lyons spoke once of her interest in exposing what she called the "nasties" of ritual, referring to aspects of ritual that did not conform to a "warm fuzzy" Durkheimian model of social cohesion. Lyons explained that acknowledging the nasties requires that one perceive events as real things that happen to real people and produce real effects. I interpret this as there being two sides to a coin: what is purported and promoted to be happening is occurring, and there are also things occurring that are not emphasized as happening, generally because they are not consistent with the propagandized image.

It was a challenge for me to acknowledge realistically both sides of the coin with respect to the Indigenous Guatemalans. Much of my prefieldwork study elicited a romantic picture of the people that I would encounter in the field. As mentioned above, I was largely influenced by my exposure to the movement that promotes the idea that Indigenous peoples had an idyllic social structure in which the woman was valued for her abilities, often as healer, and that all natives conscientiously protect and conserve their environment—until White people come along and ruin everything. Consistent with such an ideology of positive stereotyping, the inevitable negative aspects of life in developing areas are not fully explored, that is, the nasties, or the negative side of the coin, are ignored.

In contrast, many residents of the small Ontario town in which I live are familiar with Latinos only as seasonal farm laborers or welfare recipients. These people are negatively stereotyped, the locals failing to recognize the diversity of Latin American culture. Here the positive side of the coin is ignored. Similarly, many Latinos who watch television and see the Gringos who visit their country do not acknowledge the negative aspects of American life, whereas many Latinos who have lived in America and have had a difficult time in the social milieu in which they found themselves do not recognize the diversity of American culture. It is all very confusing.

It was only weeks later in preparing this article that I realized how valuable my fieldwork experience, with all the failings that I perceived, had been in helping me to combine secondary source material and "ivory tower" theories with primary source realities. The opportunity that fieldwork provides to immerse oneself in another culture dramatically forces one out of textbook descriptions and convoluted analyses into direct contact with the real world. The discipline required to plan and to implement the research process provides a foundation on which to construct objective ideas about the subject matter. It is fieldwork that provides that



indispensable bridge between theory and practice, keeping both in balance: One needs theory to reflect on reality, and one needs reality to validate theory.

The conclusions drawn from the attitudinal challenges faced in the field argues against the “them” and “us” dichotomy that is created through both positive and negative stereotyping. It is unfortunate that this dichotomy is frequently set up, manipulated, and used for some political purpose, and that there are many people who do not recognize what ends this dichotomy ultimately justifies. It is also unfortunate that there are many who use the “them” and “us” dichotomy for their own ends. Recognition of individual characteristics tends to make it more difficult to erect and to sustain the inevitable barriers and fallacies that are created by emphasizing such divisions.

It is these characteristics that define I and you. For example, I liked and respected Doña Ascunción, not simply because she was an old Mayan *iyom* but because of the way that she treated me. On the other hand, it was a struggle to maintain my friendliness towards Sonia. Taylor and Bogdan (1998) discussed this aspect of researcher-researched that is particular to qualitative research, but Chepe put it most succinctly. “*Hay mala gente*,” he informed me shortly after my arrival in San Pedro. Perhaps he was familiar with starry-eyed students. “There are bad

people,” and they are not, unfortunately, identified by color, sex, language, religion, or any other convenient external characteristic. Understanding this reality was, for me, the negative side of the coin, a “nasty.” Now, it seems self-evident.

### Notes

1. Names of people and locations in San Pedro have been changed to protect confidentiality.

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