II

SPECIAL SECTION
THE LONGITUDINAL ETHNOGRAPHY OF VIOLENCE

Introduction

The Longitudinal Ethnography of Violence

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ABSTRACT: While many anthropologists have previously reflected on longitudinal ethnography—for example distinguishing between different categories of longitudinal research, including the ethnographic revisit, either by the same or another researcher, diachronic research projects, involving continuous and sustained engagement over time, or so-called large-scale or multigenerational projects, among others—there has been little reflection on the way particular topics of research might impact on the longitudinal research process. In particular, we argue here that the stakes of longitudinal ethnographic research come to the fore particularly starkly in relation to studies of violence. More specifically, longitudinality potentially both enhances certain risks inherent to carrying out research on violence, while also offering unique opportunities for better understanding the phenomenon more reflexively.

KEYWORDS: conflict, ethnography, longitudinal, methodology, revisit, temporality, violence

An important cornerstone of the ethnographic research method is its relationship to chronicity. In particular, properly understanding the complexity of social structures and relations is widely considered to inevitably necessitate a prolonged stay in "the field" (Herbert 2000; MacClancy 2002; Marcus 2007; Olivier de Sardan 2008; Robben and Sluka 2007; Wacquant 2003; Willis and Trondman 2000).[1] As Bob Jeffrey and Geoff Troman (2003) highlight, however, despite the manifest importance of time for ethnographic research, there has been surprisingly little explicit consideration of the potential methodological and epistemological implications linked to this particular relationship.[2] For example, there is no consensus regarding how prolonged research should take place, whether a single long stay is preferable compared to repeated shorter stays over a long period of time, nor is there much reflection on whether certain topics require more time than others to get to grips with properly, or conversely, might be more amenable to—and impact upon—the possibility of longitudinal investigation.

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This special section focuses specifically on the ramifications of longitudinality for the ethnography of violence. Longitudinal ethnographic research is perhaps the one exception to the rule that chronicity has not been explicitly considered within anthropology (see, for example, Burawoy 2003; Howell and Talle 2012a; Kemper and Peterson Royce 2002). At the same time, however, there is little in the way of any agreement as to what constitutes longitudinal research, and most commentary on the topic moreover assumes that longitudinality will affect research concerning different issues similarly. As the contributions to this special section highlight, this is by no means necessarily the case, certainly in relation to violence, which both conditions the possibilities for longitudinal research in particular ways, and is revealed differently by such investigative endeavors. By way of contextualization, in this introduction we begin by offering a consideration of the literature on longitudinal ethnography and some of the perils and pitfalls that this has raised. We then move on to consider some of the ways longitudinal ethnographic research might specifically impact the study of violence, before finishing with a general overview of the contributions making up this special section, highlighting their key insights for our understanding of the longitudinal ethnography of violence.

Longitudinal Ethnography

Probably the most extensive and systematic reflection on longitudinal ethnography is an article written by Michael Buroway (2003) in which he discusses the variable nature of what he terms "revisits," that is to say, going back to places where research has previously been carried out. His central concern is to "disentangle the movement of the external world from the researcher's own shifting involvement with that same world" (Burawoy 2003: 646), and he argues that this is in large part a function of the type of revisit involved. He distinguishes between two types of revisits, with one being the ethnographer doing research in a field setting previously studied by another ethnographer, and another being revisits to one's own field setting.

The first type of revisit often aims at refuting the findings of the original ethnography by pointing to the (problematic) relation between the ethnographer and the participants or by claiming that "their predecessors imported arbitrary theory" (Burawoy 2003: 658). A famous example is Annette Weiner's (1976) feminist revisit of the Trobriand Islands in which she proposes a reconstruction of Bronislaw Malinowski's classic study by introducing the perspective of Trobriand women. Her study shows that women wielded significant power in a domain overlooked by Malinowski, and so the study helped create a deeper understanding of the power relations between men and women. Burawoy points out that Weiner's study did not take into account the fifty plus years that had elapsed between the two instances of ethnographic fieldworks. Another aim can be to show how changes in the world, either internal or external, might have influenced the studied research site. An example is Buroway's (1979) own research, which he carried out in a factory in Chicago that had been studied 30 years previously by another ethnographer (Roy 1952). He interpreted the differences he observed in the organization of work as having been driven by external forces, namely the factory's move into a less competitive sector due to its merger with a bigger company, as well as changes in industrial relations and the US economy more broadly.

The second type of revisit is characterized by researchers going back to their own research site. Buroway (2003) identifies four such types of revisit: (1) the focused revisit (going back to find out something specific); (2) the rolling revisit (going back from time to time, but without any definite plan); (3) the punctuated revisit (returning regularly over a long period of time to observe changes over time); and (4) the valedictory revisit (going back to report on previ-

ous findings). He particularly highlights how these all lead to different types of experiences and understandings of social change, insofar as different types of revisit place greater or lesser emphasis on either "the [changing] relation of observer to participant," "[new] theory brought to the field by the ethnographer," "internal processes within the field site itself," or "forces external to the field site" (Burawoy 2003: 645), but also implicitly suggests that strictly speaking, only punctuated revisits can properly be considered longitudinal research, as they are the only revisits that explicitly aim to explore long-term change (from a realist perspective). At the same time, Burawoy also notes that it is rare for ethnographic studies to start with a predefined plan to conducting such regular, punctuated revisits. Most of the time, different types of revisits combine serendipitously, and longitudinality develops over time.

Signe Howell and Aud Talle (2012a) extend our understanding of longitudinality further by proposing that truly longitudinal ethnography is not a matter of the type of actual revisit but about the content and purpose of those revisits. In their edited volume *Returns to the Field,* they take as a starting point Raymond Firth's (1959: 22) famous distinction between "dual synchronic" and "diachronic" research. The former represents the combined perspectives from research carried out at two periods of time, while the latter constitutes an observation of social change, as trends and not simple differences; that is to say, as it takes place. Only diachronic research is truly longitudinal, according to Firth. The contributors to the Howell and Talle volume are all ethnographers who have explicitly sought to develop continuous and sustained engagement with the groups that they study over time to be able to observe at close range the social processes affecting them. This means that both ethnographer and the communities studied have changed in parallel and in interaction with each other, and as a result, have been forced to reflect on the knowledge and understanding of previous field visits: "old questions are looked at anew in the light of personal as well as local history—just as new developments locally are placed in the same trajectory" (Howell and Talle 2012b: 15).

For example, Terence Turner (2012), who conducted 45 years of fieldwork with the Kayapo in Brazil, describes how his position in the field changed from being a bachelor youth, to a young married man, to a father, and most recently to becoming classified as an elder. For her part, Elizabeth Colson, famous for her decades-long ethnographic fieldwork among the Gwembe Tonga of Zambia (1956–2000s), explains that for her, the long-term implication in the field was "a chance of facing my own failures of understanding, and at the same time learning, getting deeper in, and seeing that things are always changing and therefore that I am living as they are, in the stream of time" (cited in Kemper and Peterson Royce 2002: xv). Such insights on the passing of time are meaningful especially if we consider them in light of early ethnographic studies, which sometimes portrayed communities as bounded and "timeless," that is to say, outside (modern) temporality (see Fabian 1983).

Another form of research that can be gathered under the rubric of longitudinal ethnography are the so-called large-scale or multigenerational projects that build upon the idea of continuous reflection on the validity and reliability of the knowledge produced during fieldwork. Traditions of this kind are, arguably, more common in the US anthropological field than elsewhere, where "whole anthropology departments tended to get involved in such longitudinal studies" (Howell and Talle 2012b: 9). A classic example is the so-called Chicago School of Sociology. As James F. Short, Jr. points out in his Foreword to James Carey's study of the Chicago School of Sociology, faculty and students "did not think of themselves as [a School], . . . [but] they were acutely aware of and enthusiastic about their involvement in a collective enterprise of great importance" (1975: 1). This was the case at two levels. The first was as part of a global project to understand the nature of urban life, with members of the Chicago School contributing studies of specific urban phenomena in cities in the United States, Brazil, China, South Africa, among

others (see Jones and Rodgers 2016). The second was specifically with regard to the city of Chicago, which the School used as an "urban laboratory" to train successive generations of students, sending cohorts out on a yearly basis between 1915 and 1935 to gather both qualitative and quantitative information and build up a longitudinal picture of the city's development over time (see Chapoulie 2001; Deegan 2007).

A key aspect of studies where ethnographers return time and again to the same communities is that they also learn that their knowledge and understanding is always a "work in progress" (Kemper and Peterson Royce 2002: xxiv). This is a strength that is also a weakness. Such realization directly feeds into presentations of fieldwork findings; as tentative, revealing emergent effects or as part of open-ended and inconclusive research (e.g., Berckmoes 2014; Hammar et al. 2010; Whyte 1997). From this perspective, longitudinal ethnography clearly asks for sustained reflection on the meaning of time passing. In other words, time figures not only in the data collection process, but is an explicit factor in shaping the questions asked and explanations sought throughout analysis and writing, forcing a continuous reflexivity about the validity and reliability of observations, interpretations, and conclusions (Howell and Talle 2012b).

The Longitudinal Ethnography of Violence

As can be seen from the above debates, the ways in which longitudinality influences and is influenced by the specific content and topic of research has received little consideration, with most of the discussion being quite general in scope. Yet it would seem logical that particular topics will lead to different dilemmas and issues in relation to longitudinal ethnographic research. In this regard, we want to put forward that violence arguably reveals the potential perils and pitfalls, but also advantages, of longitudinality in an especially stark manner. This was the underlying premise of a workshop on "The Longitudinal Ethnography of Violence" that we co-organized at the Netherlands Institute for the Study of Crime and Law Enforcement (NSCR) on 22–23 June 2017,[3] which brought together a group of scholars carrying out long-term ethnographic research on violence in different settings. The purpose of the workshop was to build on the ever-expanding literature focusing on the methodological, practical, and ethical implications and consequences associated with researching violence ethnographically, and to think about these specifically in relation to longitudinality, something which seemed to us to constitute a "gap" in the field.

Certainly, there is a long tradition of considering the epistemological and methodological quandaries associated with the ethnographic study of violence. Building on the early calls of both Nancy Howell (1988) and Jeffrey Sluka (1990) to pay attention to the consequences of violence for ethnography, Carolyn Nordstrom and Tony Robben (1995), for example, published a landmark edited volume, *Fieldwork under Fire*, which explored how violence and war as lived experiences were intertwined with their ethnographic understanding. They argued that "the ontics of violence . . . and the epistemology of violence . . . are not separate" (1995: 4), and that this had profound implications, not only for pragmatic ethnographic concerns such as the safety of researchers and informants but also for the question of ethnographic "narration" and "authenticity" (1995: 10–11). Such dilemmas have been subsequently echoed by a range of scholars, including Carol Greenhouse, Elisabeth Mertz, and Kay B. Warren (2002), Christopher Kovats-Bernat (2002), Dennis Rodgers (2007), Daniel Goldstein (2014), Jeffrey Sluka (2015), and Kees Koonings, Dirk Kruijt, and Dennis Rodgers (2019), among others.

Obviously, the practical, epistemological, and ethical challenges associated with ethnographic research on violence are multiplied when they occur repeatedly as a result of longitudinality.

At the same time, however, long-term, regular revisits arguably also enable ethnographers to apprehend and therefore navigate a context of violence or conflict better. As Howell and Talle note, "multitemporal fieldwork gives rise to a different, more profound, understanding . . . One's language skills improve, one's access to people's lives becomes ever more relaxed, one is able better to contextualize events—new and familiar—and grasp complexities more easily" (2012b: 3, 16). This is particularly significant in relation to reducing the practical risks associated with researching violence, but it can also be of epistemological import. As Henrik Vigh has highlighted, within contexts characterized by chronic violence, a longitudinal perspective can allow for an enhanced understanding of the way that violence is contextualized, as "critical events become figured upon a background of persistent conflict . . ., chronic disorder and disruption" (2008: 6).

More generally, temporal and spatial distance can also allow an ethnographer to see new things in their earlier findings (see Bourgois 2001, 2002), and provide participants with a safe space to reflect differently on their own social positioning in the past. This reflection allows for new types of narratives that are not necessarily truer than the old ones, but might provide a different understanding of the topic. It is something that arguably comes to the fore in a much starker manner in relation to violence than other issues. For example, in the study by Marie Rosenkrantz Lindegaard (2018) on youth involvement in gangs in South Africa, she only truly realized the complexities of the question when she went back and interacted with her original study participants ten years later. One of her key participants, whom she had previously described as having sought to find ways of avoiding involvement, turned out to have been a fully initiated gang member during the whole period of her study. This realization made her question her ability to establish real rapport with her participants in the past, and thereby the validity of her previous findings. However, when she directly confronted her key participant with the missing information, he explained that he had not been hiding the truth from her but rather that his own perception of involvement had changed over time: "[previously] he never considered his gang involvement significant for his life. In 2017, however, he had realized that his life in the gang was not going to go away. He had tried to escape from it by moving to another province. This move had enabled him to keep his decent and gang life parallel but not to move out of the gang" (Lindegaard 2018: 226).

At the same time, however, Howell and Talle also note that "paradoxically, it is also the case that the more one learns and the more one observes, the more the picture becomes less clear" (2012b: 16–17). On the one hand, the "chaos of warfare and incomprehensibility of violence" (Robben and Nordstrom 1995: 1) so often mentioned in ethnographies on violence may entail that a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon is a utopia. On the other hand, a longitudinal perspective can also lead to excessive abstraction, insofar as conceptual frameworks are developed and applied to the whole of the empirical data gathered. As one participant in Lidewyde Berckmoes' longitudinal study of conflict in Burundi lamented, when searching for answers on political events in the country, "and us, we remain in hypotheses" (2017: 925, our translation). Long-term research can also often mean expanding the sites of research over time, which in the context of studies of violence and conflict often means engaging with conflicting agendas and perspectives that can confuse the picture of things. For example, discovering and sharing "the truth" about violence and conflict is often a key objective of many diasporic communities of groups affected by violence, who may propose and push for different interpretations from those who remain in-country (Turner 2018; Turner and Berckmoes 2020).

But it is perhaps methodologically that the development of a sense of omniscience as a result of engaging in longitudinal research can have the most problematic ramifications in the context

of studies of violence or conflict. As Dennis Rodgers (2019) highlights, the constant return to a particular context means that the longitudinal ethnographer will almost inevitably develop a feeling that they know the place that they are studying intimately, to the extent that nothing can surprise them, and he describes an episode where his overconfidence led him to almost being shot because he assumed that he had a total understanding of the dynamics of the violent context that he had been researching for, at that point, almost 15 years. In a different vein, reflecting on her ongoing longitudinal ethnographic research in war-affected Burundi, Berckmoes (2019) has written about how the timing of her returns is in part dictated by the political violence or threat thereof, and the way this fundamentally impacts her research. In practical terms, violence or the threat of violence impacts the availability of research funding or the chances of her obtaining a (research) visa. But violence also affects her access to specific groups, who during new outbreaks might move or become positioned in different ways to the past. As a result, it is not just the possibility of doing research that becomes conditioned by temporality, but also the very research itself (see also Hedlund 2019).

The Special Section

In order to reflect further on the particular ways that longitudinality influences the ethnography of violence, this special section brings together some of the contributions presented at the earlier-mentioned workshop on "The Longitudinal Ethnography on Violence." The contributors are a mix of both early career and seasoned scholars, who have all engaged in some form of longitudinal ethnographic research on violence and conflict. Some of them have undertaken multiple synchronic revisits to the same group or the same fieldwork site, while others have engaged in a more diachronic, prolonged scrutiny of one type of violence, or have mapped out a conflict as it has manifested itself across time and space. Some of the studies that the participants have engaged in are explicitly longitudinal in their research design, while others have serendipitously developed into longitudinal research. In all cases, however, the contributors to this special section explore how a longitudinal perspective has informed and affected their ethnographic knowledge and theorization about violence, how it has conditioned their methodology in both research and writing, and they also explore a range of practical, ethical, and emotional perils and benefits. In bringing these contributions together, we hope to highlight the complexity of conducting longitudinal research in relation to a topic generally characterized by danger, unpredictability, upheaval, and moral dilemmas, and to show how longitudinal perspectives can help us gain deeper insight into the lived realities of political, criminal, and other forms of extraordinary and everyday violence.

The first article of the special issue, by Dennis Rodgers, elaborates on three epistemological pitfalls specifically associated with longitudinal ethnographic research in contexts of violence. Drawing on distinct aspects of his ongoing multitemporal research on gang violence in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández, a poor neighborhood in Managua, the capital city of Nicaragua, the first two concern the way that longitudinality conditions issues of representation, including how both his narrative of violence, as well as that of some of his informants, changed over time, and the impact this had on audiences. The specific topic of violence makes this representational conditionality particularly stark and reverberates back the intensity inherent to the topic. He then goes on to explore how the longitudinal nature of his research on violence also cemented a narrative to himself that meant that when new forms of violence emerged in the neighborhood, he was ill-equipped to engage with them, as they fundamentally challenged his epistemological presuppositions.

The second article by Heith Copes, Lindsay Leban, and Jared Ragland focuses on the way narratives about intimate partner violence can change over time as a process of meaning-making of the person constructing the narrative. The authors draw on ethnographic fieldwork with people who use methamphetamine in rural Alabama in the United States that involves photo-elicitation interviews. Their analysis provides "an individual longitudinal perspective" on the way one participant portrays herself over time as well as her changing perceptions of herself, her partner, and incidences of abuse. This contribution highlights how following the same participant over longer periods of time provides an understanding of the way they deal with intimate partner violence, including why and how they excuse the violence at one point in time while at another come to an understanding of it as abuse. In doing so, it highlights how a longitudinal perspective on violence permits a heightened epistemological reflexivity that is not necessarily the hallmark of other issues or topics.

The third article, by Simon Turner, shows how research in war-ridden areas implies adjusting to the unpredictability of the conflict and the constant threat of another outburst of violence. He draws on ethnographic fieldwork in Burundi that required moving in and out of the field following the rhythm of the conflict. While this exercise was not a planned part of the research process, it involved "a contextual longitudinal perspective" typical of research on violence in war zones. Just as an outburst of violence is disruptive for the lives of the participants, it is too for the researcher because it requires going and gathering information whenever possible. In that sense, longitudinal ethnographic research in war zones involves "before" and "after" perspectives that fundamentally shape the process of research but also the perspective of the participants in ways that are particularly powerful. Even when the violence stops, people make sense of it in retrospect, and this meaning-making process shapes the way they anticipate the future.

The fourth article by Ann-Karina Henriksen explores how peer conflicts of young women who have used violence in the past play out over time and inherently involve a potentiality that they might have recourse to violence again if they deem it necessary. She draws on ethnographic fieldwork with young women in Denmark, who have a history of crime or are at risk of entering in conflict with the law. By following how their peer conflicts are played out in face-to-face encounters and via contacts on social media, Henriksen shows how vulnerable women use violence—both as actually committed and as threats—to gain status from their peers and control over their own precarious lives. Her "longitudinal perspective within the field" involves using time analytically to understand violence, despite her fieldwork only including one period of seven continuous months, and highlights also how this longitudinality inherently constructed violence and its possibility in a particular way.

Finally, the article by Robert Roks considers the way his book portraying a gang leader in the Netherlands brought "the field" into his academic office when it became public. After initial contact on social media, a representative of the gang leader showed up in Roks' office, confronting him over the interpretations of his book. Through this incident and continuing discussion on social media, the relationship Roks had established with the gang leader during his fieldwork period took on new dynamics and embedded Roks into the alliances involved in determining the violent activities of the gang. This longitudinal perspective without the field shows how doing research on violence potentially positions the researcher in risky social networks that cannot just be switched off at our convenience when we move to different topics, but might continue to play a role in our lives over the longer term. This realization raises ethical dilemmas about how we portray participants engaging in violent acts over the longer term, but also about how we position ourselves as witnesses to violence and whether we can change this positioning or not.

Taken together, the contributions to the special section raise a variety of new issues in relation to both longitudinal ethnographic research and the ethnography of violence, but they all

do so in a way that highlights how these inherently feed on each other, precipitating new dilemmas—and opportunities—as well as bringing old ones to the fore in heightened ways compared to longitudinal research on other topics. To a certain extent this is due to the particular power of violence as a social phenomenon, but longitudinal ethnographic research also exposes the researcher to the phenomenon in a repeated and cumulative manner, transforming what is often experienced as an event into a process. It is perhaps at this level that the uniqueness of the longitudinal ethnography of violence is revealed, and what makes it an important issue for further reflection and exploration.

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NOTES

1. The notion that ethnography requires a prolonged stay can be traced to Bronislaw Malinowski's (1922) pioneering research in the Trobriand Islands, which was based on a two-year stay. Yet Malinowski did not originally set out to spend two years carrying out ethnographic research. Indeed, he traveled from

London to New Guinea in 1914 to carry out six months of ethnographic research with the Mailu, but following this, found himself stuck in Australia with the outbreak of World War I. He was about to be interned as an enemy alien (being a citizen of the Austro-Hungarian Empire), but was allowed, instead, to be exiled to the Trobriand Islands, where he spent two years in 1916–1918 (Anonymous 1942). As his diaries reveal (Malinowski [1967] 1989), he was by no means happy with this fate, and in many ways his extended fieldwork can be seen as an instance of "accidental anthropology" (Pieke 1995), although there is no doubt that he subsequently became converted to extended fieldwork, carrying out further instances himself, and asking the same of his students.

2. A notable exception in this regard is Johannes Fabian (1983).
3. This workshop was co-funded by the Netherlands Institute for the Study of Crime and Law Enforcement and the University of Amsterdam Chair of International Development Studies (then held by Dennis Rodgers).

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