

## References

- Chan, Alina, and Matt Ridley. 2021. *Viral: The Search for the Origin of Covid-19*. Harper Collins.
- Fairfield, Tasha, and Andrew E. Charman. 2017. "Explicit Bayesian Analysis for Process Tracing." *Political Analysis* 25 no. 3 (July): 363–80.
- Fairfield, Tasha, and Andrew E. Charman. 2022. *Social Inquiry and Bayesian Inference: Rethinking Qualitative Research*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Humphreys, Macartan, and Alan M. Jacobs. 2023. *Integrated Inferences: Causal Models for Qualitative and Mixed-Method Inference*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- King, Gary, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba. 1994. *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Ragin, Charles. 1997. "Turning the Tables: How Case-Oriented Research Challenges Variable-Oriented Research." *Comparative Social Research* 16:27–42.
- Slater, Dan. 2009. "Revolutions, Crackdowns, and Quiescence: Communal Elites and Democratic Mobilization in Southeast Asia." *American Journal of Sociology* 115(1):203–254.
- Qualitative & Multi-Method Research* 18(2), "Symposium: Authors meet Critics—Veil of ignorance Process Tracing."
- Qualitative & Multi-Method Research* 14(1), "Symposium: Causal Mechanisms and Process Tracing."



# Notes from the Field

Qualitative and Multi-Method Research

Fall 2022, Vol. 20.2

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8326524>

## Boundaries Unsettled: Invisible Threats and Activist Scholarship in Uruguay

Francesca Lessa

*University College London*

February 10, 2017, was a warm summer evening in Mendoza, Argentina. The thick blackout curtains were trying, unsuccessfully, to keep the torrid heat out of the room. In the sunset light, I glanced at my phone on the bedside cabinet. A message from my friend Silvia flashed on the screen.

Although my memories of that hot summer evening are fuzzy in places, I will never forget the content of that WhatsApp message: Silvia wanted me to know that she had heard my name on the evening news in Montevideo, Uruguay, as integrating a death list composed of 13 people, mostly authorities (including the country's attorney general and minister of defense), lawyers and human rights defenders, 10 of whom were Uruguayans and three foreigners. I knew many of them personally given the research I had been conducting on impunity for dictatorship-era crimes in Uruguay for almost ten years.

For the next few hours, I was in a shock-like state trying to make sense of what was unfolding.

Me? On a death list? In Uruguay?

I did not tell anyone about the death threats for the first 24 hours: I was unable to find the words to articulate the situation, which seemed rather surreal in those initial moments. Nothing in all the training courses I had completed as a researcher in my years at the University of Oxford—on fieldwork security, risk assessment, ethics, and vicarious trauma—could have prepared me for this.

A previously unknown group in Uruguay had disseminated the death list to the media, local authorities, and also emailed it directly to some of the threatened people themselves. I had not received anything, though, aside from Silvia's message. The death threats came from the self-proclaimed "Comando General Pedro Barneix" and read as follows (IACHR 2017):

"The suicide of General Pedro Barneix will not remain unpunished... No more suicides or unjust prosecutions will be accepted. From now on, for every suicide we will kill three people selected at random from the following list."

The communique then listed thirteen names and ended with an ominous warning: “And we have several more, whose addresses and habits we have already compiled.”<sup>1</sup>

The group named itself in homage to Pedro Barneix, a retired Uruguayan general who had been indicted for the murder of ice-cream maker and left-wing sympathizer Aldo Perrini, in the city of Colonia in 1974, during the country’s 1973 to 1985 military dictatorship. On September 2, 2015, when the police went to his house to formally notify Barneix of his pre-trial detention, he killed himself. The general had been a trustworthy associate of President Tabaré Vázquez, of the left-wing coalition “Frente Amplio” (Broad Front), during his first mandate between 2005 and 2010. Vázquez had in fact appointed Barneix and General Carlos Díaz in 2005 to participate in an investigative commission within the Army to gather information on the fate of the disappeared (El País 2017).

In the next few pages, I reflect upon the experience of receiving death threats whilst on extended fieldwork in South America, the challenges I faced both personally and professionally as a result, how I dealt with them, and how that experience has shaped the relationship with my research communities. This article is written in an autoethnographic style that includes emotions and turning points, as well as “interpretation, reflection, and direct experience, which shows vulnerability rather than distance” (Carspecken 2023, 3).

### Fieldwork Under Threat

In the following days after receiving Silvia’s message, I tried to determine from Mendoza the contours of what was exactly unfolding in Uruguay. It was not until two weeks later that, on February 24, I eventually received—in response to my inquiries—an email from the General Directorate of Information and Intelligence of the Uruguayan police that officially informed me that my name was “effectively” included amongst those that the Comando Barneix had threatened with death. With this official confirmation in my hand, I proceeded to inform my line managers and braced myself for the oncoming storm.

The existing literature on research methods and ethics does not contemplate nor discuss the challenges that I faced, both personally and professionally, because of these death threats. A brief review of the scholarship finds numerous publications on conducting fieldwork in risky and violent contexts (Nordstrom and Robben 1996; Sriram et al. 2009; Mac Ginty, Brett, and Vogel 2021; Schultz 2021), as well as on researchers’ positionality and reflexivity (Kohl and McCutcheon 2015; Berger

2015; Folkes 2023). There is no discussion, however, of what happens when the researcher becomes part of the dynamics that she or he is studying, when the boundaries become so blurred, overturned, unsettled, when the researcher has turned into the “researched.” The closest I could find is the interesting article by Melissa Mendez (2023, 93) who introduces the concept of “victim-as-researcher,” to identify people who have been victims of “a violent, physical crime” and have afterwards conducted projects that required them to interview “offenders who have been perpetrators of criminal acts” similar to the crimes they experienced.

This is nonetheless still different to what happened to me. By all accounts, Uruguay is one of the safest countries in South America. Because of this, I had cleared and achieved approval for my risk assessment rather easily: I had conducted research on impunity for dictatorship-era human rights violations in the country since 2007 and undertaken countless trouble-free trips there. By 2016, I also had a large existing network of people and contacts on the ground, which constituted a plus in terms of my risk assessment. What neither myself nor my colleagues in Oxford at the time could have envisioned was that I would be specifically targeted because of the very research that I had been carrying out for almost a decade.

The objectives of the threats were both broad and specific. Broadly, to try to stop—or at least delay—the incipient wave of prosecutions that had finally begun in Uruguay after decades of impunity. The Comando Barneix spoke of “unjust prosecutions” in its email espousing the death threats, and named itself after an ex-general who was, at the time of his suicide, facing trial for murder. Specifically, to silence the voices of numerous people involved in their different capacities in human rights issues relating to the recent past in Uruguay. This included me—an academic who had decided to focus her work on what Uruguayans lovingly call “*el paisito*” (the small country).

Serving as a backdrop to this situation was the tragic fate of Giulio Regeni, an Italian PhD student at the University of Cambridge who had been abducted, tortured, and murdered in January 2016 by intelligence officers of the dictatorship of Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi while conducting field research in Cairo. Because of what had happened to Giulio just a year earlier, neither the University of Oxford nor the Italian Embassy in Uruguay were willing to take any chances. They wanted me to return to Oxford and to Italy, respectively.

Uruguayan authorities did not seem interested in seriously investigating the threats, nor did they offer much protection or support to any of the threatened

1 Author’s translation from the original Spanish.

individuals. In this complex scenario, and with the prospect of me having to spend another 18 months in Uruguay, the University of Oxford, the insurance provider, and the Italian Embassy all concurred that I should not return to Uruguay, not even to pack my belongings.

Eventually, I was able to reach a compromise with the University of Oxford: I would relocate to Buenos Aires, where I had previously lived between 2014 and 2016, and continue the project from there. But should anything else happen, I agreed to return to Oxford immediately.

## A Winding Road

In the following weeks, as I tried to salvage my research project under threat, as well as myself, I faced two sets of challenges: one personal, one professional.

Personally, I had become very fond of Uruguay over the years since my first trip there in September 2007. Ten years later, I regularly visited the country not only for research purposes but also because I had developed many connections and friendships. The most difficult aspect for me was accepting that Uruguay, a place where I had felt safe, which I had considered a second home, and what my friend Fernando jokingly said was “*mi lugar en el mundo*,” (my place in the world), was so no longer. This loss of certainties was profoundly unsettling.

Professionally, the most urgent challenge was redesigning my project. In some cases, fieldwork does throw the basic premises of a project, such as the research question or case selection mechanism, upside down, a scenario that La Porte (2014, 414) labelled a “crisis of research design.” I faced a crisis of research design, of sorts. I had to redesign my project whilst already in the field, but because I had been cut off—for my own safety—from my primary research site and the sources of data (archives, prospective interviewees) that I had intended to use.

After several years of unsuccessful fundraising efforts, in early 2016, I had finally secured a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Global Fellowship, to study the crimes of Operation Condor and probe the response of national justice systems to these transnational atrocities through the lens of Uruguay. Since Uruguayan citizens had been abducted in each of the Condor member states, by reconstructing their cases, I planned to study the whole network of transnational repression and its *modus operandi*. However, I could no longer set foot in Uruguay, at least for the foreseeable future.

Back in Buenos Aires, I grabbed the broken pieces of my original project and faced the task of reorganizing my research plans. At this time, I received the solidarity of numerous peoples and NGOs, which was invaluable to keep me going.

My initial methodology revolved around the combination of three sets of primary sources in Uruguay: archives, legal documents and the monitoring of criminal trials, and interviews. I had to adjust the project so that I could rely on those same sources but from any of the other Condor countries—some of which were unexpected.

When it came to archives, Carlos Osorio of the National Security Archive in Washington and Jair Krischke of the Justice and Human Rights Movement in Porto Alegre, Brazil, both opened the doors of their non-governmental organizations and said I was welcome to use their records instead. Regarding legal documents and trial monitoring, I could no longer follow the Condor trials taking place in Uruguay, but with support from Jorge Ithurburu, president of the Italian NGO 24 marzo, I was able to focus my attention on the trial for Operation Condor crimes in Italy. Underway since 2015, this criminal process probed the murders of 23 Italian citizens, 18 Uruguayans, and two Argentines. In the midst of so much uncertainty, I travelled to Rome a few months later in December 2017, and that trip was like a second chance: I could somehow recover this project and felt I was beginning to do so. As for interviews, since Uruguayans often travel to Buenos Aires for weekends and holidays, I could still interview some of the research participants, who generously donated their time during such trips. Moreover, having expanded my focus to include victims of Operation Condor of all nationalities, I conducted additional interviews in Brazil, Chile, Argentina, the US, and Italy.

I wish I could say that there was a clear strategy and plan of action, as I put back together what felt like a broken project, but it would be a lie: I tried to develop a coherent whole using the pieces I had already gathered and with the new ones I was able to access under my troubling new circumstances.

One unexpected and positive development was the creation of the database on “South America’s Transnational Human Rights Violations (1969-1981).” This unique and comprehensive dataset began as a simple excel sheet in which I had listed several names of Uruguayan and Argentine victims of Operation Condor, to provide guidance to my research assistant, Nuria, who was tasked with completing the review of the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Montevideo which I had started five months earlier. Ultimately, it became the database it is today due to a collaboration with Argentine sociologist and database expert, Lorena Balardini. The insights that emerged from the analysis of this dataset were instrumental for two reasons. First, they enabled me to develop an original five-phase periodization of transnational repression in South America between

1969 and 1981 that better shows the evolution of the dynamics that led to the emergence and downfall of Operation Condor—which I discuss at length in *The Condor Trials* monograph (Lessa 2022). Second, the data compiled on the 805 victims provided evidence to substantiate new findings, while giving additional weight to existing conclusions on transnational repression in South America. For example, on the one hand, the dataset confirmed that Argentina was the main operative theatre of transnational repression, with 68% of victims being murdered or initially abducted there—a conclusion that had been pointed to by the criminal trials. On the other, it challenged the evidence by US and South American archival documents that justified the emergence of Operation Condor in 1975 as a way to counter the coordination among guerrilla groups, known as the Revolutionary Coordinating Junta (JCR from its Spanish acronym), that had been underway since 1974. The dataset not only showed transnational repression episodes that dated back to 1969—so much earlier than 1974—but also that the majority of victims pursued were in fact political and social activists, not members of the JCR.

### **Activist Scholarship**

Looking back at the first 12 months following the death threats, I operated as a firefighter that was always on call: I was constantly resolving various crises, whether it was finding a new host institution and supervisor, sorting out the paperwork needed for my visa for Argentina, finding a new place to live, in constant communication with embassies and consulates, dealing with the travel insurance company and their security consultants, and so forth.

Because of the solidarity and support that I received from family, friends, and colleagues on both sides of the Atlantic, I was able to regroup and get all the data I needed in the remaining 18 months in Argentina, and through additional trips to the US, Chile, Brazil, and Italy.

At that time, while I was permanently putting out fires to keep the project going, I did not fully realize a challenge that would become long-lasting: I was no longer a distant observer to the dynamics of impunity that I had scrutinized for a decade in Uruguay, I had become absorbed by my research topic.

To be fair, I had never been “a distant observer” in the sense that, in my opinion, when it comes to issues of human rights violations and injustice, impartiality and objectivity are not feasible. My engagement with local communities potentially did not amount to what anthropology scholars qualify as a “militant ethnographer,” but I was at least “a committed scholar,” one that produces sympathetic knowledge that is useful

to social movements and struggles (Valenzuela-Fuentes 2019, 722). Professor Ken Booth (1997, 115) wonderfully depicts the “special and privileged role” that academics have, through knowledge, “to unsilence the silenced; [...] to speak up for those who do not have a voice.”

By revealing the policies and politics of impunity in democratic Uruguay, I had exposed the country’s failure to comply with the international human rights obligations that it had voluntarily assumed, and to deliver justice to the victims and their families, as well as the broader society, whose rights had been systematically violated under twelve years of state terror. I also brought attention to the fact that impunity was a clear obstacle to putting in place guarantees of non-repetition and, thus, continued to generate conditions whereby human rights would likely be violated again.

My activist scholarship was the result of the profound connections to Uruguay that I had developed over the years, by closely collaborating and engaging with colleagues and activists on the ground. I was keen to find ways in which my scholarship would transcend the dreaming spires of Oxford and help make a difference on the ground—which is where it really mattered in the end.

Receiving the death threats demonstrated, paradoxically, that my activist scholarship had been successful. The consequence, however, was that the dynamics of impunity that I had been analyzing for so long entangled me completely. As a recipient of death threats that Uruguayan authorities had no intention whatsoever to investigate—whether in 2017 or today—I had been drawn into the very impunity that was the object of my research. With the passage of time and the continued lack of answers, I began to experience—on a small scale—some of the consequences of the impunity that victims of the Uruguayan dictatorship had faced for decades.

Soon after the threats, on March 1, 2017, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights condemned what was happening in Uruguay and noted the importance of prosecutions for serious crimes committed during the dictatorship in order to ensure access to justice for the victims (IACHR 2017). Two years later, with no progress on the horizon, on February 27, 2019, the Commission reaffirmed its concern about Uruguay’s failure to investigate the death threats. It urged the state to ensure timely, thorough, and diligent investigations to establish and punish their perpetrators and masterminds, remarking that those threats “could increase the risk of impunity in cases linked to human rights violations in Uruguay” (IACHR 2019).

Inspired by what I had studied for years, I attempted to push back against impunity. Nine of the people who

had been threatened—myself included—presented a petition to the Inter-American Commission against Uruguay in early February 2019, claiming the violation of several of our human rights, including the right to judicial protection (article 25 of the American Convention on Human Rights). We denounced the lack of progress in the investigation of the criminal case relating to the death threats we had received. We placed this in further context by showing how other human rights defenders and judicial authorities had also been threatened—most notably, the threats, break-in, and theft of equipment from the offices of the Forensic Anthropology Group, a specialized team that conducts excavations within military premises in the search for the disappeared in Uruguay, which had occurred over the 2016 Easter holiday.

While the consideration of the petition by the Commission is likely to take many years, it has already had an impact on Uruguayan authorities, who wish to maintain the country's reputation in human rights. A few months after the Commission formally notified the petition, we saw initial signs of progress. In September 2021 (well over four and half years after the threats), a 34-year-old medical student was charged with being the leader of the Comando Barneix and is currently awaiting trial. The petition is key to maintaining pressure on the authorities in Uruguay to investigate all the perpetrators and masterminds behind the threats. While the charged student might have been the person who sent the email, given his knowledge of the deep web and TOR platform, which was used to avoid leaving a footprint, he does not fit the profile of the masterminds behind these threats—both in my view and that of many of the other people threatened. Impunity is still looming over our criminal case, and we might never know who threatened us.

### Final Thoughts

If I could travel back in time to 2017 and tell my old self that the project would, eventually, be fine, I do not think that she would believe me. On many occasions, especially in the early months, dealing with the consequences of the death threats and keeping the project going seemed like an impossible task. But all the people I met during my years researching impunity in the Southern Cone have shown me what resilience is really about: to keep going even when everything seems to conspire against you.

My dedication to activist scholarship, which had put me at risk in the first place was, eventually, vindicated. Not only I did complete the project, despite significant delays, but *The Condor Trials* book was finally released in 2022 and went on to win the 2023 Juan Méndez Book Award for Human Rights in Latin America. Notably, the research I fought so hard to conduct has also had unprecedented impact, which is very close to my heart. Key findings from the database on the victims of transnational repression in South America in the 1970s were used by the Inter-American Commission and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in 2019 and 2021 respectively in the *Julien Grisonas Family vs. Argentina* case—an emblematic Operation Condor case in which I was an expert witness for the Julien siblings, and in which Argentina was eventually found internationally responsible for the atrocities suffered by the family. In 2023, I served as an expert witness in two additional Condor-related cases. In February, I appeared before Rome's Criminal Courts, where I explained to the Italian judges the dynamics surrounding state terror and transnational repression in South America, alongside the personal stories and trajectories of the three victims and the defendant in the second Condor trial in Italy. Then in May, I appeared before Chile's Supreme Court, where I illustrated the origins of the first Italian Condor trial and described the fate of four Italian-Chilean victims whose murders had been probed in criminal proceedings which concluded in 2021.

That it became possible to present insights from my research in court in support of long-standing victim struggles against impunity reaffirmed to me the significance of activist scholarship, despite everything that had happened.

Since this experience, I am much more aware of the potential implications of my methodological and personal choices and what I would label the invisible or unplanned sources of risk. Researchers might be less aware of these given their invisible nature, but they have the potential to undermine a research project as significantly as more visible threats. Invisible threats need to be taken into careful consideration before and during a research project, not only for their professional implications but also for the researcher's wellbeing.

### References

- Berger, Roni. 2015. "Now I See It, Now I Don't: Researcher's Position and Reflexivity in Qualitative Research." *Qualitative Research* 15, no. 2 (April): 219–34.
- Booth, Ken. 1997. "Security and Self: Reflections of a Fallen Realist." In *Critical Security Studies: Concepts and Cases*, edited by Keith Krause and Michael C. Williams, 83-119. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Carspecken, Lucinda. 2023. "Writing Strategies in Autoethnography and Memoir: Methodological Legacies from Three Activist-

Scholars.” *Qualitative Research* <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941221138403>

- El País. 2017. “Se suicidó el general Pedro Barneix tras saber de su procesamiento,” September 2, 2017. <https://www.elpais.com.uy/informacion/se-suicido-el-general-pedro-barneix-tras-saber-de-su-procesamiento>
- IACHR (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights). 2017. “IACHR Condemns Death Threats in Uruguay.” March 1, 2017. [https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/media\\_center/preleases/2017/021.asp](https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/media_center/preleases/2017/021.asp)
- IACHR (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights). 2019. “IACHR Concerned about Failure to Investigate Threats against Justice Operators Active in Cases of Serious Human Rights Violations during Uruguayan Dictatorship.” February 27, 2017. [https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/media\\_center/PReleases/2019/045.asp](https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/media_center/PReleases/2019/045.asp)
- Kohl, Ellan, and Priscilla McCutcheon. 2015. “Kitchen Table Reflexivity: Negotiating Positionality Through Everyday Talk.” *Gender, Place and Culture* 22, no. 6: 747–63.
- Folkes, Louise. 2023. “Moving Beyond ‘Shopping List’ Positionality: Using Kitchen Table Reflexivity and In/visible Tools to Develop Reflexive Qualitative Research.” *Qualitative Research* 23, no. 5 (October): 1301–18.
- La Porte, Jody. 2014. “Confronting a Crisis of Research Design.” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 47, no. 2 (April): 414–17.
- Lessa, Francesca. 2022. *The Condor Trials: Transnational Repression and Human Rights in South America*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Mac Ginty, Roger, Roddy Brett, and Birte Vogel, eds. 2021. *The Companion to Peace and Conflict Fieldwork*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mendez, Melissa. 2023. “Partisanship and Positionality in Qualitative Research: Exploring the Influences of the Researcher’s Experiences of Serious Crime on the Research Process.” *Qualitative Research* 23, no. 1 (February): 92–107.
- Nordstrom, Carolyn, and Antonius Robben, eds. 1996. *Fieldwork Under Fire: Contemporary Studies of Violence and Culture*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Sriram, Chandra Lekha, John C. King, Julie A. Mertus, Olga Martin-Ortega, and Johanna Herman, eds. 2009. *Surviving Field Research: Working in Violent and Difficult Situations*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Schulz, Philipp. 2021. “Recognizing Research Participants’ Fluid Positionalities in (Post-)Conflict Zones.” *Qualitative Research* 21, no. 4 (August): 550–67.
- Valenzuela-Fuentes, Katia. 2019. “Militant Ethnography and Autonomous Politics in Latin America.” *Qualitative Research* 19, no. 6 (December): 718–34.



Qualitative &  
Multi-Method  
Research

# Notes from the Classroom

Qualitative and Multi-Method Research

Fall 2022, Vol. 20.2

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8326533>

## Reimagining Research Design Instruction: Student and Teacher Reflections on the Reverse Research Design

Phillip M. Ayoub  
*University College London*

Jaya Duckworth  
*Occidental College*

This piece is a follow-up on a pedagogical exercise called the “reverse research design” (Ayoub 2022).<sup>1</sup> As a teaching tool, the reverse research design involves students stepping into the shoes of a published author and transporting themselves back in

time to craft a grant proposal for an already-concluded study. This hands-on exercise guides them through the intricacies of research design while temporarily easing the anxiety of formulating their own research question and project. At the request of the QMMR editors, we

<sup>1</sup> We summarize the assignment and parts of the argument based on the Ayoub (2022) study, which we recommend being read in conjunction with this follow-up piece.