NINE

From "Broder" to "Don"

Methodological Reflections on Longitudinal Gang Research in Nicaragua

Dennis Rodgers

INTRODUCTION[1]

On 13 July 2012, I was conducting an interview with Kaiton,[2] a 23-year-old ex-gang member in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández, a poor neighbourhood in Managua, the capital city of Nicaragua, when he said something that shocked me profoundly. We had been talking about his recent involvement in a particularly violent mugging, and I had asked him to explain to me what had motivated him to be so brutal. He told me that his victim had resisted the mugging, pulling a knife on him and slashing him, which had "pissed [him] off" and prompted him to "really do him in," including "disarm[ing] him and then . . . [sticking] his knife in his stomach, to teach him a lesson." It was however neither the violence of the mugging, nor Kaiton's explanation for his brutality that shocked me, but rather the fact that he began his account by saying: "*Pues, usted sabe como es*, *Don* Dennis . . . (Well, you know how it is, *Don* Dennis. . .)." Since I had at that point in time spent over a decade and a half working with gang members in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández, including one year as an actual gang member (see Rodgers 2007), I *did* know "how it was," but this was not the issue. What was, rather, was that Kaiton was calling me "*Don* Dennis," and addressing me as "*usted*," despite the fact that this was not the first time that I was interviewing him. We had previously always used the familiar "*voseo*" rather than the formal "*usted*" to address each

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other, and also generally called each other "*broder*" (brother) or "*maje*" (mate) during our exchanges. I was perplexed by Kaiton's sudden formalism, and in fact interrupted him, exclaiming somewhat forcefully: "*oye, que la verga* (what the fuck), Kaiton, since when do you say '*Don*' and '*usted*' to me? Am I not your *broder*? What's got into you?"

Kaiton looked a bit nonplussed, shrugged, and then pressed ahead with his narrative, but he also continued to address me formally, so at the end of our interview, I persisted further on the issue. What transpired from our subsequent discussion was that Kaiton felt that I had crossed a boundary line at some point between my 2009 and 2012 visits, and that I had gone from being "one of us" to somebody who was now "*mayor*" (old), "*una persona seria*" (a serious person), and "*respetable*" (respectable). It furthermore rapidly became apparent that Kaiton was not the only gang-related individual calling me "*Don* Dennis" and treating me in a formal manner—almost all the ex-gang members of his generation, as well as current gang members, were doing so too. This contrasted starkly with previous visits, and also with the way that ex-gang members from the 1990s treated me, insofar as they continued to call me "*broder*" and treat me with great familiarity. There is no doubt that I have been getting old(er) during the course of my fieldwork, and also that my social status has changed over the course of the past 18 years, for example from graduate student to professor. However, my personal development is only a partial explanation for the evolution of my relationship with Kaiton and other gang-associated individuals in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández. Much more important is the particular nature of the research that I have been conducting in Nicaragua, and more specifically, its longitudinality.

Although longitudinal ethnographic research is by no means uncommon, especially within anthropology, its methodological ramifications are rarely explicitly considered. There is no doubt that longitudinal research is different from other forms of investigation, and this chapter therefore aims to offer some reflections on the particular perils and pitfalls, but also the unique advantages, of such an endeavour, in particular as they relate to the research that I have been carrying out since 1996 on Nicaraguan gang dynamics in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández. It begins by considering the idea of longitudinal ethnography, and what this actually means in practice, before then exploring how longitudinality can affect the research process, both negatively and positively, with regard to practical considerations as well as research practices. While some of the issues that I explore are common to all forms of longitudinal research, other concerns are specific to the study of gangs, including more specifically those relating to the changing experience and understanding of risk and danger.

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LONGITUDINAL ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH: "BEING THERE" AND "NOT BEING THERE"

In an article published in 2003 in the *American Journal of Sociology*, Michael Burawoy discusses the variable nature of what he terms ethnographic "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. Burawoy identifies four principal types of revisits: (a) the "focused" revisit (going back to find out something specific); the "rolling" revisit (going back from time to time, but without any definite plan); (c) the "punctuated" revisit (returning regularly over a long period of time to observe changes over time); and (d) the "valedictory" revisit (going back to report on previous findings). He particularly highlights how these all lead to different types of experiences and understandings of social change, insofar as different types of revisits 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 he also implicitly suggests that strictly speaking, only punctuated revisits can really be considered longitudinal research, as they are the only revisits that explicitly aim to explore long-term change from a realist perspective. Having said this, Burawoy also notes that it is rare for ethnographic studies to be started with a view to conducting such regular, punctuated revisits. Most of the time, different types of revisits combine serendipitously, and longitudinality develops over time.

My own longitudinal ethnographic research on Nicaraguan gangs is a case in point in this respect. It began with my spending a year in Nicaragua in 1996-1997, in order to carry out fieldwork for my doctoral studies. My pre-fieldwork doctoral project had aimed to explore how the economic survival strategies of the urban poor related to political ideology in a post-revolutionary context, and so my focus on gangs was largely accidental, contingent on the fact that during my first couple of months in Nicaragua I suffered several violent encounters with gangs and then subsequently moved—for completely serendipitous reasons—into a neighbourhood—*barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández[3] —that happened to have a particularly notorious local gang. Both of these experiences firmly fixed my attention on gangs as a topic of investigation and set the tone for my research. In particular, due to a series of perhaps somewhat unlikely events, within a few weeks of directing my investigative attentions towards gangs, I ended up actually being initiated into *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández's local gang a couple of months after arriving in Nicaragua (see Rodgers 2007). As a result, during the course of the subsequent ten

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months, I was able to carry out extensive participant observation with the gang, spending significant amounts of my time hanging out with gang members on street corners and in their homes, smoking, drinking, chatting, as well as participating in a range of gang activities, both violent and non-violent.

Becoming a gang member obviously provided me with an incredible ethnographic research opportunity.[4] I was able to rapidly familiarise myself with gang norms, codes, and behaviour patterns, and it gave me extensive access to gang members, and allowed for open and frank interviews that were not clouded by fear or mistrust (on either side). I was able to hear from gang members what it was that had motivated them to join the gang, how they perceived themselves, as well as obtain extensive details about their delinquent activities. I was able to compare their discourses against their everyday practices, as well as observe individuals acting in a range of different circumstances, including some that would normally have been impossible for a non-gang member to observe. More generally, I engaged in what Loïc Wacquant (2004, viii) has termed "carnal ethnography," experiencing—obviously only up to a point, within the limits of my particular standpoint as a foreigner and an anthropologist—a "moral and sensual conversion to the cosmos under investigation."[5]

The fact that I joined the gang also provided the foundation for my longitudinal research. Although I formally "retired" from the gang when I left Nicaragua in July 1997, I was trusted as an "old timer" when I returned for my first revisit in 2002, and gang members—old and new—continued to be willing—indeed, eager—to exchange and to share details about their illegal activities. This continued to be the case during my subsequent revisits in 2003, 2007, 2009, 2012, 2014, and 2016. These revisits were of different natures, however. My 2002 revisit was both a rolling and a valedictory revisit. I had no agenda other than the very general intention to see if anything had changed since my first visit, as well as to "report back" to individuals who had contributed to my research in 1996-1997. My 2003 revisit to *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández was similarly rolling in nature (indeed, it was completely opportunistic, as it was the result of my going to Nicaragua for a holiday). My 2007, 2009, 2012, 2014, and 2016 revisits were more focused in nature, motivated by the intention to investigate certain specific issues and processes. In 2007 and 2009, I returned to Nicaragua to study the political economy of Managua's urban transformation, for a project on "Fragile Cities" funded by the London School of Economics's Crisis States Research Centre (see Rodgers 2008; 2011; 2012). In 2012 I went back to carry out interviews on the evolution of firearm use by different generations of gang members, funded by the Geneva-based Small Arms Survey (see Rodgers and Rocha 2013). In 2014, I returned in order to carry out two specific interviews, one with an ex-gang member who had emigrated to Miami—where I stopped on my

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way to Nicaragua—and the other with an ex-gang member turned drug dealer who had been released from prison after having served four years of a seven-year sentence for drug-dealing (although I also carried out other interviews whilst in the *barrio*). Finally, in 2016, I returned explicitly to continue my individual gang member life history interviews (see below) and celebrate my 20 years of ethnography in the *barrio*.

Although my visits since 2007 have been focused in nature, I am effectively returning to Nicaragua more or less every 18 months, and I plan to continue this for the foreseeable future, most likely combining rolling and focused revisits. The regularity of my revisits is effectively transforming them into punctuated revisits, especially as every visit I engage repeatedly in a number of activities aimed at chronicling social change in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández: regularly re-interviewing a range of individuals about new developments, taking the same "transect" walk through the neighbourhood, taking the same photos over and over again to visually document changes, and so on. Having said this, the timing of my revisits has unquestionably been extremely important. As Raymond Firth (1959, 22) famously highlighted in his "re-study" of the Tikopia in Melanesia, a distinction has to be made between "dual synchronic" studies and "diachronic" studies when thinking about longitudinal 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. Strictly speaking, this is only really possible if the ethnographer is *in situ* during the whole time period that they want to study, which is of course rarely practical, so the next best thing is to engage in regular revisits, but these have to be appropriately timed in such a way to be able to observe trends rather than disparate "snapshots."

There are obviously significantly serendipitous aspects to this, both in relation to practical considerations as well as the need to be "in the right place at the right time." With regard to the former, for example, I would ideally have liked to return to *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández within a year of my first stay there. As a doctoral student, I simply did not have the financial means to travel to Nicaragua in 1998, and I had to wait until I finished my PhD degree and was hired by the London School of Economics's Crisis States Research Centre in September 2000 until this became a practical possibility. Indeed, part of the reason for my recruitment was explicitly to send me back to Nicaragua in order to see what had happened since my doctoral investigations, and so I returned for three months in February 2002. The fact that my first revisit ended up occurring in 2002 rather than 1998 was extremely significant, however, as it meant that I was "in the right place at the right time." By all accounts, had I returned to Nicaragua within a year of my first visit, I would have encountered a situation not hugely different from the one in 1996-1997.

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Gang dynamics, in particular, would have been very similar to the ones I had previously studied. Returning to Nicaragua in 2002, however, I found gang dynamics completely transformed. In particular, the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang had mutated from being a vigilante-style organisation that was principally concerned with identity issues and protecting the local neighbourhood to a more predatory drug-dealing gang. Principally as a result of this serendipitous time lapse, the major focus of my research has become the institutional evolution of gangs, something that has helped me avoid conceiving of gangs in either a static or a deterministic manner (both of which are hallmarks of much existing gang research).

This was not just a question of a longer lapse of time passing by, however. I would likely have missed this evolution had I gone back, say, 10 years after my first visit to Nicaragua, in 2007 instead of 2002. The *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang had by then been supplanted by more professional drug dealing organisation known as the *cartelito* (little cartel).[6] Although I would likely have been able to glean something about the gang's institutional transformation during the preceding period from interviews, memories are notoriously fickle, and I would have had to reconstruct events rather than observe them. It is of course difficult to determine in advance how far apart revisits need to be spaced in order to enable a meaningful diachronicity, and hence there is very much a serendipitous element to this. At the same time, however, as David Mosse (2006) has pointed out, the notion that "the field" is a temporally and spatially separate and bounded location that we can only engage with *in situ* increasingly makes less and less sense. While distinguishing between "the field" and the "non-field" might have been feasible 100 years ago, when most ethnographers travelled to far-flung locations to study so-called "primitives" with whom they never had any contact outside of "the field" due to the lack of means of communication and the one-sidedness of travel, this is almost never the case nowadays. I am for example in constant contact with individuals in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernandez, by phone, email, and Skype (and am being harried to open a Facebook account and download Whatsapp. . .). This means that I'm kept informed about new developments in the neighbourhood by email and text message, and regularly sent photos and video recordings—including some in "real-time"—all of which inform my understanding of how the situation in the neighbourhood evolves between my revisits.[7]

Certainly, such communications provide me with important reference points for my investigations when I revisit *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández, to the extent that it is difficult to really make a strict distinction between "being there" and "not being there," something that also makes Firth's distinction between "dual synchronic" and "diachronic" research less meaningful. Having said this, although the increased intensity of my communication with people in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández has lessened

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the need to be "in the right place at the right time," this has also been a function of a shift in the principle type of research that I have been carrying out, which itself is related to the longitudinal nature of my research. Ethnographic investigation combines many different things, but one of the most important elements is "participant observation." This can be carried out in a more or less active way—some anthropologists privilege observation over participation, for example—and in a multi-layered manner—you can of course participate in different processes at the same time. Over the years, my participant observation in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández has for example included joining the local gang, living in the *barrio*, living with the Gomez family, running a local market stall, participating in political rallies, or hanging out and drinking on street corners, among other things. I have continued to engage in many such forms of participant observation, but as my gang research has progressed, I have however spent less time carrying out participant observation with the gang, particularly compared to my first two visits in 1996-1997 and 2002. Instead, I have increasingly focused on carrying out more purposeful one-on-one interviews, with both new and old gang members. From my first revisit onwards, I began to engage in regular "repeat interviews," initially with gang members whom I first interviewed in the 1996-1997, but subsequently with others whom I interviewed during later visits. As a result, in addition to carrying out one-off formal interviews with fifty-seven individual *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang members between 1996 and 2016, I have repeatedly interviewed nineteen more, seven every time since my first visit in 1996-1997, two every time since 2002, two since 2003, two since 2007, three since 2009, one since 2012, as well as adding two more to my sample in 2016. I have also interviewed a further eight more individual gang members on multiple occasions, albeit more irregularly.[8]

CHANGING RESEARCH APPROACHES AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL HUBRIS

This evolution in my research practice has both practical and epistemological underpinnings. With regard to the former, the generally shorter durations of my revisits—the longest of which lasted three months, the shortest two weeks, with the median duration being a month, compared to the twelve months that I spent in Nicaragua in 1996-1997—has made meaningful participant observation of certain types of events and behaviours—those predicated on a repeated, long-term engagement—difficult. I have also become increasingly reluctant to engage in the risky behaviours associated with gang participant observation (see Rodgers 2007). On the one hand, this is due to the fact that as I have become older, I have also become (a little) wiser (or at least, outgrown the "folly" of my youth. . .).

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On the other hand, it has also been a function of a particular evolution in a major gang member habit, and more specifically their drug consumption. Gang members become ubiquitously addicted to crack cocaine from the early 2000s onwards, which not only made them much more unpredictable, therefore rendering casual interaction more difficult and personally dangerous, but it also increased my social distance from them, as contrarily to the widespread marijuana smoking that gang members engaged in and that I was happy to partake in during the mid-1990s, I did not engage in crack consumption. This was all the more the case considering that while smoking marijuana had been an eminently communal activity for gang members, consuming crack was very much an individual one, and therefore did not act as "a social cement constituted of common emotions and shared pleasures" (Maffesoli 1997, 116) in the same way.

At the same time, there are also clear epistemological motivations that pushed me to adopt new research approaches. A major advantage of refocusing my research around the gathering of life histories through regular repeated interviews with a set of specific individuals is that these are inherently longitudinal data. Life histories are arguably fundamentally diachronic in nature, and they have been especially valuable in providing me with a more dynamic and nuanced picture of the gang's evolving social practices, more specifically with regard to the existence of continuities in practices and associations beyond the gang. I have also been able to explore the different types of trajectories that individual gang members can undergo, as well as trace what happens to them after they leave the gang. The fact that I have been able to record almost all my formal interviews since 2002 has furthermore also meant that I have also been able to play back past discussions to interviewees several years later, which has frequently provoked very interesting reflexive insights, particularly when their interpretations of past events differ significantly from the accounts previously recorded. Having said this, a potential problem with this particular sort of research strategy is that it does imbue the researcher with a sense of omniscience, especially when the individuals whose life histories are being gathered are people that I have known since the beginning of my research. More specifically, it has clearly fostered a sentiment that I have an enhanced, "total" knowledge about their lives and *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández more generally, one consequence of which is that unusual events jar more as a result, as I experienced in February 2014, during an interview with a gang member called Bayardo.

I had been talking about the history of the drug economy in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández with him, and had rather vainly been displaying my detailed knowledge about it, in particular narrating how the marijuana-selling business run by an individual called *el Indio Viejo* that had existed in the mid-1990s became a fully-fledged cocaine-dealing economy in the 2000 as a result of his contacts on the Caribbean coast of the country,

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before then transforming into an international drug trafficking business in the late 2000s when he began collaborating with a Colombian cartel (see Rodgers [2018] for more details). Bayardo listened to me waxing on for a while, before interrupting a little exasperatedly:

> *Pues*, Dennis, you do know that cocaine isn't anything new in the *barrio*? *El Indio Viejo* wasn't the first guy to bring it here.
>
> OK, OK, it's true, I guess, there was that time the gang held up that *diplomático* and he had cocaine with him. . .
>
> No, no, Dennis, long before that, there was cocaine in the *barrio*, in the 1980s, and it was brought here by Pablo Escobar himself, you know, the Colombian *poderoso*.
>
> What? I know who Pablo Escobar is, but *no jodas, maje*, he never came here to the *barrio*, come on, stop shitting me.
>
> I'm not shitting you, *maje*, that's what they say. I was just a kid at the time, so I don't remember, but the guy who can tell you all about it is *el viejo* René Vargas, you should go and see him.

I immediately went to find *Don* René, who proceeded to tell me the most incredible story:

> Yes it's true, Pablo Escobar stayed here in the *barrio* in the 1980s. I think it was 1984-1985, something like that. He stayed at my mother's place—she rented rooms out, you see, and one day some people from the government came and asked whether she could put up four men. She said yes, and so Pablo Escobar came to stay, with a friend of his called Gustavo Gaviria, as well as a *Salvadoreño*, Raul Mata, and a Mexican, *como se llamaba*, *algo* Gacha (what was he called, something Gacha). . . They stayed for several weeks, and paid really well, and also became really friendly with people here in the *barrio*. I drank with them several times, but the person you should really talk to is Lucia, you know, the *suegra* (mother-in-law) of your friend Julio whom you're always hanging around with—*ella bailo por el narco*—she danced for the drug dealer (in the context, a euphemism to indicate that she had been a prostitute).

I decided for obvious reasons that it was perhaps best not to talk to Lucia directly about this, but cautiously approached her daughter, Marlene, who was married to my good friend Julio, about her mother's potential relationship with Escobar. Marlene began by telling me that according to her mother it was absolutely true, that she had slept with Pablo Escobar, and she regularly boasted about it when she drank too much, and she also confirmed that her mother had been a prostitute at the time. Still somewhat unconvinced that Pablo Escobar had really stayed in the *barrio* in the 1980s—it seemed to me at this point more likely that it was some random Colombian who had been transformed into Pablo Escobar by

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virtue of the latter's notoriety—I then asked Marlene whether she would be willing to show a picture of Pablo Escobar to her mother, but without saying who it was and asking her whether she recognized him. She agreed, and so I immediately went to an internet café to find a photo of Pablo Escobar via Google Images to print and give to her that very evening.

The next day Marlene came to see me and said that her mother had immediately exclaimed "*Ay, mi Pablito lindo*" on seeing the photo, and had confirmed that the person that she had slept with was indeed *the* Pablo Escobar. Slightly stunned by this development, I proceeded to do a bit more research via the internet. I focused especially on the names that *Don* René had mentioned and found that they were all names of know Escobar associates. But even more amazingly, I subsequently discovered that Pablo Escobar had indeed visited Nicaragua in 1984, and that there were photos of him, along with the Mexican Rodriguez Gacha, taken at Managua airport on 25 June by the undercover DEA agent Barry Seal.[9] Further research suggested that Pablo Escobar may have visited Nicaragua several times in the 1980s,[10] seeking a deal with the *Sandinista* regime to allow him to transport drugs freely across the country (which by all accounts, they refused, but at the same time without making any moves to arrest or extradite Escobar, perhaps wise to the huge potential of his cartel to be violent, as the Colombian state was to discover when he declared war on it in the late 1980s). It would make sense that Escobar might want to stay in a poor neighbourhood rather than a five-star hotel in order to avoid alerting the DEA, which he would likely have known to be trailing him, and to this extent, the story of Pablo Escobar staying in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández is not necessarily implausible.

It was however a major surprise to me, however, because I felt that I knew the neighbourhood, its history, and everything to do with the drugs business there very well, and I certainly assumed that nothing of this magnitude would be unknown to me. As such, this anecdote highlights the importance of never losing sight of the inevitable partiality of the research endeavour, all the more so when one is carrying out longitudinal investigations. It is all too easy to fall into the trap of feeling that we know it all, especially if we have accumulated a depth of knowledge about a particular context through longitudinal research, something that inevitably promotes a sense of omniscience and what might be termed "ethnographic hubris." Having said this, the story of Pablo Escobar in the *barrio* is a relatively innocuous one, and has effectively provided me with a rather unusual and somewhat comical anecdote when I discuss the drug economy in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández. The sense of omniscience and ethnographic hubris that can develop as a result of carrying out longitudinal research can however have much more dangerous consequences, particularly when the research is about dangerous topics or occurs in contexts of chronic violence.

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BARRIO TRANSFORMATION, RESEARCH TRANSFORMATION

This has certainly proven to be the case during the course of my own research, where my particular trajectory as, first, a gang member, and then a respected "elder," meant that although the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang has evolved and changed over time, I have often felt that I had a good handle on it, as well as, more generally, of the political economy of insecurity in the neighbourhood. Indeed, for a long time, although the gang was a major source of insecurity for many, it was one over which I had a certain influence, and I therefore felt very much in control during my research. While this was without doubt the case during my revisits in 2002, 2003, and 2007, where it could be argued that I was effectively managing what—following Donald Rumsfeld, the US Secretary of State during the George W. Bush presidency—might be termed "known uncertainties," this changed subsequently. The neighbourhood gang's (temporary) demise between 2006 and 2012 led to the emergence of "unknown uncertainties" that were more difficult for me to appreciate due to my particular research trajectory, and changed my ethnographic experience substantially.

This transformation was related to the professionalization of the cocaine economy in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández, which had initially emerged in a rather organic and *ad hoc* manner around a single individual, *el Indio Viejo* in 1999-2000 (see Rodgers 2006; 2018). He had initially involved the local gang as street dealers and security apparatus, but by late 2005 had gathered a shadowy group referred to locally as the *cartelito,* who had muscled out local gang members. This led to the development of tensions—also linked to the fact that the *cartelito* did not want any potential challengers to its dominance in the neighbourhood—and after a series of violent confrontations in early 2006 that left several gang members critically injured and one dead—executed in cold blood "as a warning to the others," as his killer Mayuyu put it in an interview in July 2012—the gang effectively ceased to exist as a collective unit. The *cartelito* then sought to consolidate its domination over the neighbourhood through a campaign of intimidation against local residents. Unlike with the gang, local inhabitants could only identify a few individuals associated with the *cartelito,* as its membership remained a close-guarded secret.[11]

As a result, levels and feelings of insecurity had reached new heights in the neighbourhood during my 2009 revisit, as anybody was seen as a potential source of danger, and there were no clearly discernible patterns to the violence afflicting the neighbourhood, meaning that developing consistent avoidance strategies was difficult. Unexplained shootings were commonplace, including for example the one I experienced late one evening in November 2009, as the following extract from my field diary describes:

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> Tonight I was helping Pablo, Adilia, and Argentina [two members of the Gomez family with whom I stay when I'm in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández] to bring a motorcycle into the house and lock the front door, when a motorcycle with two men suddenly surged out of darkness, and the man on the back seat pulled up a shotgun and pointed it at us. We all threw ourselves to the ground screaming, but the driver shouted "No, no, está no, la próxima" [no, no, not this one, the next one], and they drove on to the next house, into which they shot two rounds. Nobody has any idea who they were, or why they shot in into the neighbour's house, but it has left everybody involved—including myself—shaken and on edge in a way that past episodes of violence never did—including those perpetrated by the gang, even when they were highly brutal and predatory of local inhabitants. . .

It was very much the unpredictable nature of the violence that made it an "unknown uncertainty," and which fundamentally changed the lived experience of insecurity in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández, as well as my ethnographic experience. As a result of this, my 2009 revisit was much scarier than the previous ones.

Having said this, it is not just the emergence of "unknown uncertainties" that can be complicated within the context of longitudinal research. Much of the power of the ethnographic methods derives from its flexibility, and the ability that being both an insider and an outsider at the same time gives to seize on contingency. An ethnographic approach inherently leaves open the possibility of engaging with the new, the unexpected, or even simply interacting on a basis that is not open to those who are from this given context. There were certainly many moments during my initial visit to Nicaragua where the fact that I did not know certain practices or people very well allowed me to ask questions and engage in a range of activities in a socially less constrained manner. Going back to Nicaragua and engaging in long-term research has however changed the nature of many of the relationships I have with people in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández, and created expectations, both directly, in terms of material or emotional demands, for example, as well as indirectly, insofar as I cannot get away with "playing the idiot" in order to elicit information as much as before, because people assume that I will know certain things about the neighbourhood context.

While this of course has numerous benefits—increased trust, more sharing, less lying—the flipside is that I have much less social flexibility than I had at the beginning of my research. Sometimes this is also a result of extraneous factors. For example, my relationship with older gang members in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández has always been much stronger than younger ones. During the 1990s, this was actually a significant advantage, as it provided me with an extra aura of authority vis-à-vis younger gang members, who deferred to older ones. This particular relationship persisted into the 2000s, despite gang member generational turn-

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over, with new gang members generally respecting older gang members. They were therefore always happy to talk to me and answer my questions. This generational deference has dissipated since 2012 and the post-*cartelito re*-emergence of a new gang, whose members often pick fights with older ex-gang members, partly "to prove themselves." This has particularly involved individuals who belonged to the gang in the early 2000s, but both the fact that I am associated with the 1990s iteration of the gang, as well as my being on good terms with most gang members from the 2000s, this generational conflict has sometimes made my researching contemporary gang dynamics more difficult.[12] At the same time, however, by 2016 the new gang wave in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández had once again mutated with the unprecedented rise of a female gang (see Rodgers, forthcoming), whose members I was able to interview surprisingly easily, clearly partly because I was a male foreigner (as well as the fact that I am well-known in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández as a vocal critique of *machista* social practices), so to a certain extent it can be argued that there are "swings and roundabouts" in this respect.

CONCLUDING REFLECTION

Longitudinal ethnographic research is often held up as a major aspiration, yet it is an investigative strategy that has a range of ramifications that are rarely considered, whether from a practical or an epistemological perspective. There are clearly numerous benefits to carrying out longitudinal research, whether from a "dual synchronic" or a "diachronic" perspective, although the latter is probably the most interesting, insofar as it allows a dynamic focus on trends and evolutions, and is therefore a much better reflection of the way the "real" world works. At the same time, a longitudinal approach also inherently pushes the researcher towards certain practices, and both opens up and closes off avenues for investigation. When the research focuses on a phenomenon such as gangs, it also creates a range of practical dilemmas relating to risk and danger. But this in many ways is simply on a par with research in general, where any particular approach, any particular focus, or any particular practice will inevitably both enable and inhibit. Research is by its very nature imperfect and limited, and this not only in terms of "the data," but also "the method," "the researcher," and "the context." Having said this, longitudinal research is clearly also imbued with a particular addictive quality. Certainly, in my case, partly as a result of the rather serendipitous nature of my initial research, and the way that "nothing was as expected," there is no doubt that I feel a compelling fascination to know "what happens next" in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández, and it is this that spurs me to return again and again, and will no doubt continue to do so for the foreseeable future. . .

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NOTES

1. Preliminary versions of this paper were presented at a panel session on "Ethnographies and/of Street Violence in Latin America" at the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) annual meeting, Chicago, 21–24 May 2014, the conference on "Anthropologists at Work: Challenges and Dilemmas of Qualitative Fieldwork Methodologies in Sensitive Settings," Utrecht University, 3 July 2014, and to an Urban Sociology Lab brown bag research seminar at the University of Texas, Austin, 20 October 2014. Thanks to participants at all these encounters for useful comments and suggestions.

2. This name is a pseudonym, as are the names of all the neighbourhood inhabitants mentioned in this chapter.

3. This name is a pseudonym.

4. It is important to note that gang members knew that I was carrying out research about them.

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5. There is obviously a gendered aspect to my research that should be kept constantly in mind, insofar that I am a male researcher investigating a phenomenon that is extremely gendered, and this clearly played a critical role in terms of the research possibilities open to me. Although female gang members are not unknown in Nicaragua, until 2016 all the gang members I encountered in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández were young men, and many of their social practices and behaviour patterns were intimately related to a *machista* way of being. As a result, I do not think I would have been able to have the same form of engagement with the gang that I did had I been a female researcher. On the other hand, my gender—as well as my association with the gang—also negatively impacted on the possibility of my exploring a number of other research avenues, including, for example, complicating my interaction with gang members' girlfriends, due to *machismo*-related notions of jealousy, for example.

6. The *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang completely disappeared between 2006 and 2012, but has since reappeared following the demise of the *cartelito* (see Rodgers 2017a; 2017b).

7. This veritable plethora of communication has built up progressively, of course, and is very much a function of technological evolution. I actually lost touch with people in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández between my first and second visits, largely due to the fact that there were very few phone lines in the neighbourhood at the time—and these were moreover often only ephemerally connected—while postal services were extremely unreliable and letter-writing was not a common practice. Email use took off in the mid-2000s with the spread of internet cafés, while mobile phones only began to become common from the end of the 2000s, and smart phones—with cameras—only from the early 2010s onwards.

8. To these formal interviews must also be added eleven group interviews, as well as hundreds of hours of more informal conversation and interaction with gang members past and present, as well as over one hundred interviews about gangs with non-gang member inhabitants of *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández.

9. See http://www.proyectopabloescobar.com/2011/05/pablo-escobar-en-nicaragua.html.

10. See http://www.confidencial.com.ni/articulo/3345/el-fantasma-de-escobar-recorre-nicaragua.

11. The group also involved individuals who were not from the neighbourhood and its membership moreover did not overlap with any collective category—such as "male youth," for example—that allowed local *barrio* inhabitants to adopt certain generic avoidance behaviour patterns.

12. It should also be noted that this current crop of gang members is also the first generation to have no direct knowledge of my initial involvement with the gang in the 1990s, and they clearly trust me less as a result.

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