

## Chapter 2

# Research Design

**Abstract** As stated in the previous chapter, this research attempts to illustrate the ‘lived experiences’ of those affected by the Chixoy Hydroelectric Dam, and the violence that occurred during and after its construction. In order to achieve this objective I used a range of qualitative research methods, including semi-structured interviews, or *testimonios*, observation, and participation in the 2008 UNBC Geography field school. In addition to the ethnographic component my research utilized secondary documents, which led to a wide-ranging literature review on the topic.

**Keywords** Human geography • Ethnography • Research design • *Testimonio*

### 2.1 ‘The Field’

The bulk of my research was carried out in the field, employing ethnographic methods (Hay 2005; Patton 2002). According to Johnston et al. (2000, 238), ethnography is used “to convey the inner life and texture of a particular social group or locality.” Through interviews, observation, and participation in meetings and daily activities, I supplemented what had already been written about the topic, while bringing to light the on-the-ground realities so often left out of development studies.

Ideally, ethnographic research is carried out over an extended period of time, where one can fully engage with a community or particular location. As stated by geographer Taylor (2007, 182), “It is only through time in a community, however, that a story of past and present life emerges.” Aside from my preparation in Canada I spent a total of four months in Guatemala, with roughly half of this time in the communities of Rabinal and Río Negro. Although this provided enough time, I believe, to interview a sufficient number of participants to reach saturation (Kirby and McKenna 1989, 123) on certain key themes in my research, as well as achieve a general understanding of what life is like in the communities, I cannot claim in this

limited time to have a completely in-depth, first-hand knowledge of the everyday realities of living in resettlement and extreme poverty, and believe it would take a much longer commitment to achieve that purpose.

As a result of my commitment to solidarity with those individuals affected by the Chixoy dam and resultant massacres, bias and subjectivity inevitably shaped the research design and approach. My goal, as explicitly stated at various points throughout this study, as well as to all those involved in my research, is to document the effects of the Chixoy Dam on the original residents of Río Negro and their families. As an open critic of mega-projects—and genocide—it was my aim to generate evidence, in the form of oral histories and my own personal observation, that would denounce and expose the institutions and ideologies responsible for the displacement, cultural annihilation, and murder that took place against the people of Río Negro (Witness For Peace 1996; Johnston 2005). Purposefully, I did not interview, or even try to contact, people in support of the dam. If desired, I potentially could have located individuals involved in the paramilitary at the time of the counterinsurgency, and heard, first-hand, their side of the story. Although this may have provided a more balanced study, I believe that by operating in this manner I would have jeopardized my relationship and trust with survivors, as well as broken my commitment, and solidarity, with respondents (see Nolin 2006, 10–18). And therefore I chose to omit this possibility entirely.

As mentioned in the introduction, my fieldwork for this research began while participating in the UNBC field school during the month of May 2008. Co-taught by Dr. Catherine Nolin and Grahame Russell of Rights Action, this course exposed a handful of students, and myself, to the realities of Indigenous displacement, the legacies of the 36-year internal armed conflict, and the current struggles for rights-based development. Among so many localities, our group arrived to Rabinal, as well as the remote resettlement community of Río Negro. Despite my previous knowledge of Chixoy, it was at this point that I made initial connections with local leaders and heard, first-hand, the stories that I had read so much about. Sebastian Iboy Osorio, who was president at the time of the local COCODE (community development council) in Río Negro, was our guide for the trip to his community, which included a boat ride across the reservoir, and a night at the recently built Centro Histórico (Historical Center). At various points, Sebastian shared his personal story, or *testimonio*, of the violence that occurred in Río Negro, as well as stories of his life, and that of the entire community. He also spoke of development projects taking place in Río Negro, and guided us up the mountain to the site where he lost most of his family during the March 1982 massacre at Pocoxom.

After seven months in Canada, writing my research proposal and gaining approval from the Research Ethics Board (REB) at UNBC, I returned to Guatemala. Almost immediately, I joined a human rights delegation in Rabinal, with Grahame Russell as well as two professors from the University of Guelph. The purpose of this visit was for Grahame to introduce me to Carlos Chen, who was co-director of COCAHICH (Coordinator of the Communities Affected by the Construction of the Chixoy Dam), as well as a Río Negro massacre survivor. Due to Grahame's tight

affiliation and support for the various organizations working towards justice and reparations in Rabinal and Pacux,<sup>1</sup> Carlos, as well as other members, warmly welcomed me and encouraged further contact upon my return. Word was also sent, through these men, to Sebastian in Río Negro, informing him of my objectives to carry out this study. It goes without saying that my proposed work in Rabinal, and Río Negro, would have been much more difficult if not impossible without these initial introductions, and obvious support from Grahame.

## 2.2 Data Collection

The bulk of my data was obtained through semi-structured, open-ended interviews, as outlined by Dunn (2005) and Leech (2002). According to geographer Dunn (2005): "Semi-structured interviews employ an interview guide. The questions asked in the interview are focused and deal with the issues or areas judged by the researcher to be relevant to the research question" (88). These "interview/conversations" (Nolin 2006, 16) were typically long (one to three hours), exhaustive on the particular issues, and highly emotional. Although interviews were highly variable, based on the age of the respondent, or whether they were a current resident of Pacux or Río Negro, I followed a standard set of questions.

This form of in-depth interviewing, also known in geographic methodologies as *testimonio*, has demonstrated, according to ethnographer Haig-Brown (2003), "an apt approach to respectful, useful, and overtly political research" (416). Haig-Brown (2003) also states that the *testimonio* "has the potential to create space for other impossible knowledges that are underrepresented or invisible within conventional academic discourses" (416). The *testimonio* as a research method is also a useful way to obtain the histories of a community without interviewing every single person, a concept Hanlon and Finola (2000, 267) refer to as "collective remembrance." As stated by Haig-Brown (2003, 420): "Central to the testimonial is the fact that the life story presented is not simply a personal matter; rather, it is the story of an individual who is also a part of a community. A *testimonio* presents the life of a person whose experiences, while unique, extend beyond her/him to represent the group of which she/he is a member."

While hoping for the most accurate depiction of what took place in Río Negro at the time of the construction of the Chixoy Dam, I do realize the concern over accuracy surrounding the use of in-depth interviews, or *testimonio*, and concur with Clifford and Marcus (1986, 7) in that all, "ethnographic truths are thus inherently

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<sup>1</sup>A handful of local Maya-Achi groups were founded in the early 1990s to address the problems associated with the Chixoy dam. COCAHICH, and ADIVIMA (Association For the Integral Development of the Victims of Violence in the Verapaces, Maya-Achi) are a couple of the most well known.

partial—committed and incomplete.” As stated by Nolin (2006, 18), “in-depth interviewing can be an excellent tool if the researcher is flexible enough to allow for some inconsistency, repetition, exaggeration, or omission in order to understand the subject of their research project in more depth.” She also goes on to mention that “when the limitations of *testimonio* and in-depth interviewing are understood and acknowledged, then the identified shortcomings can be dealt with through supplementation with secondary material such as newspapers, journalistic accounts and other written material” (Nolin 2006, 18).

Following the interviews of several key informants (see Patton 2002, 321), such as Sebastian in Río Negro, and Carlos in Rabinal, a snowball sampling process (Monk and Bedford 2005, 62) led me to other interviewees. My initial goal was to collect at least ten testimonios, from a diverse set of individuals—male, female, older, younger, from Pacux and Río Negro—as well as community leaders who were involved in the social justice movement, and could speak of issues that affected the entire community. In the end, I conducted 15 interviews. This number, I believe, provided a sufficient amount of data necessary to supplement previously written accounts, while also allowing for the development of new themes. Although I do not claim to have the ‘whole’ story collected through my limited amount of interviews and time spent among residents, the 15 interviews illuminated several themes to be discussed in chapters 5 and 6.

Depending on whether I was in Pacux or Río Negro, or if other outsiders were visiting, I had variable success in locating respondents willing to speak with me. The collection of some of the richest data occurred during discussions and lectures given to visiting groups while I was in Río Negro. Following these events I was usually able to ask questions that pertained to my research, as well as get contact information for future interviews. In Pacux, Heidi McKinnon, a volunteer with The Advocacy Project, was immensely helpful in leading me to respondents, particularly women, which in turn resulted in other interviews. Although I am content with the number of interviews I conducted in Pacux, I could have conducted many more if needed. Residents were particularly fond of Heidi and her work in the community, and took me in with an incredible amount of confidence and trust.

Interviews generally took place in the homes of individuals, on the deck of the Centro Histórico in Río Negro, or at the ADIVIMA office in Rabinal. I used a digital tape recorder and asked everyone’s permission before turning it on. No one requested to be anonymous nor had a problem with the recording of our discussions. Due to the highly publicized nature of the Río Negro massacres, and the success they have had with international solidarity groups, survivor’s expressed no fear in giving *testimonios* or participating in studies and media events. Many respondents asked to have their pictures taken and included in the report with their full names used.

As a strategy to obtain the most accurate information possible, as well as ask newly emerging questions, I interviewed several key informants, such as

SEBASTIAN<sup>2</sup> from Río Negro, as well as MARIO from Pacux, on multiple occasions (Baxter and Eyles 1997, 5). Because of the informal nature of my visit, especially in Río Negro, many discussions also took place while walking, eating, or in the boat, which I wrote about in my notebook.

Participant observation was another aspect of my fieldwork, which generated a sizeable amount of data both in the communities, as well as throughout my time elsewhere in Guatemala. As stated by Kearns (2005, 196), “participant observation of a geographer involves strategically placing oneself in situations in which systematic understandings of place are most likely to arise.” Although interviewing key individuals was essential in gathering data about the past and present conditions for the lives of the survivors, my observations and conversations in an everyday, unstructured setting offered new perspectives crucial for this study. While in communities, I always had a small notebook with me, and would wait for appropriate times to jot down notes. I then transferred all the notes into a larger notebook, which I used in my analysis.

## 2.3 Analysis

Data analysis followed a systematic protocol under the guidance of Kirby and McKenna (1989), Patton (2002), Hay (2005) as well as my supervisor, Dr. Nolin. This entailed transcription of interviews from digital to word documents, followed by an identification of recurring themes through a coding process. The most pronounced themes I found within the interviews were: (1) Effects of Violence; (2) Economic Impacts; and (3) Contemporary Development. After identifying these initial over-arching themes, I identified subthemes that corresponded, and supported, the major topics. For the analysis chapter of this book, I synthesized the themes and subthemes into a narrative. In this narrative I also included direct quotes of selected respondents, in order to strengthen the weight of my argument (Baxter and Eyles 1997).

## 2.4 Ethical Considerations

At the forefront of my ethical concerns was that of representation. As stated by anthropologists Marcus and Fischer (1999, 83), “the crisis [of representation] arises from uncertainty about adequate means of describing social reality.” At various points throughout the research I caught myself thinking: *Who am I, a North*

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<sup>2</sup>All interviewees involved in this study are mentioned in CAPITAL letters, in order for the reader to make a distinction between them and other individuals. It should also be noted that, due to the sensitive material some interviewees shared with me, I decided to change several names into pseudonyms—despite the fact that no one asked to remain anonymous.

*American white male, to interpret the stories from Río Negro, to express their dreams of development, while molding it into complex theories and explanations?* In grappling with this dilemma, I attempted to remain conscious of my limitations as an interpreter of knowledge and experiences, and kept in mind that all writings of this nature (whether the author believes so or not) are highly dependent on the individual perceptions and background of the researcher. I also attempted to remain explicit and self-reflective (Dowling 2005, 28) throughout the process, from research to writing to presentation, with the full acknowledgement that what I saw, wrote about, and questioned, was entirely based on my emotions, as well as my academic background and interests.

Alongside the issue of representation and interpretation is that of ‘positionality’ (see Aitken and Valentine 2006; Sundberg 2003). As explained by England (2006, 289):

Positionality is about how people view the world from different embodied locations. The situatedness of knowledge means whether we are researchers or participants, we are differently situated by our social, intellectual and spatial locations, by our intellectual history and our lived experiences, all of which shape our understandings of the world and the knowledge we produce...Positionality also refers to how we are positioned (by ourselves, by others, by particular discourses) in relation to multiple, relational social processes of difference (gender, class, ‘race/ethnicity’, age, sexuality, and so on), which also means we are differently positioned in hierarchies of power and privilege.

As a North American (with all the privileges and power that go along with it) I often wondered what interviewees thought about me, and whether there was any resentment—although none was visibly expressed. I also wondered, at times, whether my respondents—especially in Pacux—hoped that by speaking with me, they might be able to get some form of financial gain from it. There was one instance where an interviewee talked at length about his financial woes, and how he hoped that Rights Action would help fund some of his project ideas. He then went on to mention, several times, my relationship with Grahame Russell. This was an isolated incident, and for the most part I firmly believe that respondents knew my objectives well, respected me, and appreciated my solidarity to their cause.

As stated earlier, my own background of education, upbringing, and political stance, as well as my position of solidarity and compassion for those I interviewed affected the way I wrote and planned this study. At times, my own attachment to the survivors, as well as the emotional challenges I had in dealing with the stories I heard made it difficult to maintain my ‘professionalism’ (Hume and Mulcock 2004, 154). I felt compelled to help respondents any way that I could and at times held myself back from giving some of the women in Pacux personal donations after hearing about their struggles. As a means of dealing with these emotions, while also desiring to achieve my research objectives, I attempted to study my own emotions by keeping notes and opening up to survivors as a friend. This, in turn, empowered and propelled me, and made my small and seemingly insignificant objectives feel worthy.

Despite the consideration of all these issues, I believe that I acted in an ethical manner throughout this project. I worked in collaboration with the participants of the study, and tried my best to employ methods that would empower and relate their story, in the most accurate way possible, to an audience that might not be reached were it not for someone with the privilege to listen and observe.

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