

Notes from the Field: Overheard Insights from Ethnographic Fieldwork

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Sunday, July 15, 2012. I was about four months into my dissertation fieldwork in Santiago, Chile, where I was studying the influx of Latin American immigrants to Chile and trying to understand the implications of this migration for both migrants and Chileans. A demographic departure from previous migrations, this new wave of migrants largely consists of women from neighboring nations. Most of these migrant women work as live-in domestic laborers, and thus, I accommodated my research to their schedules. The typical day off (or days off, for a fortunate few) began late Saturday and lasted until Sunday evening. Thus, Sundays were busy days and rarely my own day off. While empty streets and pajama-clad Chileans buying bread at corner stores were typical sights on Sundays in Santiago, I would head off to meet with research participants. I would typically start by attending Mass at a church that was a locus of migrant relationships in Santiago. On July 15th the service was particularly boisterous, as the congregation celebrated Colombia's Independence Day. There was traditional dancing, a band played vallenato music, representatives from the consulate and embassy gave long speeches, and the service ended with a dance-inducing version of the Colombian rock star Juanes' song, "A Dios Le Pido."

Normally after the service I would head down to the church basement with most of the congregation and join in lunch, a rotating mix of tastes of home: Colombian lechona, Bolivian locro, Peruvian seco, Brazilian feijoada. During the processes of getting in line to buy the meal ticket, finding a seat, and waiting in a second line to pick up the food, I would catch up with people I knew and try to meet new people. That

day, however, I could not drum up the enthusiasm and energy needed to introduce myself and my research time and again, pitching my project, recruiting participants, and building rapport. Mentally tired, I decided to take a break and treat myself to lunch. I ducked quietly out the church gates, walked across the cold and damp park, and took the subway to one of Santiago's upper class commercial districts. Once there, I made my way to a vegetarian restaurant that I liked. Regarded in Santiago as tantamount to a health food establishment, it is a place that attracts health-conscious customers. Fortunately, it was open on Sundays, and the waiter sat me at a small table tucked behind a group of five boisterous women. I ordered, then pulled out an article to read while waiting for the food. I was reading about Peruvian migration and neighborhood settlement patterns, when a comment from the next table caught my attention.

The woman sitting closest to me asked the group: "Can you believe that I have to leave the nanny in the house alone all day long? I mean, alone?!?!" She continued by assuring her fellow diners that she always rushed home right at five p.m. to ensure both that nothing was missing and that the children were okay. The conversation continued in an animated discussion about the trials and terrors of domestic laborers. There was a discussion on what an employer had to do if they wanted to send their nanny out to buy something at the store: "You would think that after a month she would know that we call toilet paper 'Confort' [in Chile]." Explicit grocery lists with descriptive items in standard Spanish were needed because nannies often made mistakes when shopping. However, it was the last comment which reverberated longest. One woman announced to the rest that she was really concerned that her nanny was overweight. She had subsequently put her nanny on a diet and restricted what she was allowed to eat. By that point, I was alternating between flabbergasted, indignant, and, at the same time, completely unsurprised.

Typically my fieldwork consisted of spending Monday through Friday from 10am to 5pm with women at a migrant center, talking with migrants as they waited for potential employers to come to interview them. Several women insisted on teaching me how to crochet, and we would craft square-after-square of knitted goods while conversing. At the migrant center, the women all knew I was doing dissertation research. As part of my introduction, or when greeting someone for the first time, I would tell them about my project. Some of these women participated in semi-structured interviews, and many took it upon themselves to explain to me what life was like in Chile and what it was like to work for Chileans. For example, the women spoke at length about the different “tells” they had identified to determine if potential employers would be good employers. For some, the style of dress and presentation was most illuminating; others insisted smiles, laughter, and easy conversation during the interview were positive signs; some women closely observed how potential employers interacted with their own children; and several insisted that the best indicator came later during the house tour, if the employer had paid attention to the quality and comfort of the nanny’s bedroom. But the one issue that the migrants I met all agreed upon was the importance of food in their places of employment and the ability to eat appropriate and sufficient food. Not a day went by at my research site where women did not share tales—often tearfully--of food rationing and restrictions that they faced in affluent Chilean households.

Returning to that Sunday at lunch, as I overheard the casually-spoken appraisals and analysis of domestic labor from the employers’ point of view, I was struck by the gulf of misunderstandings and differing values. Later, as food became a more salient research theme, I often would think back to these women’s appraisals, to the importance they placed upon body shape, self-presentation, and maintaining a certain domestic order. This unexpected insight, gleaned on an afternoon I had deliber-

ately tried to take off, is indicative of both the trials and gems of ethnographic fieldwork. Doing fieldwork in a large urban center, there were many times when I observed and overheard relevant conversations, remarks, and jokes about migration. Part of the richness of ethnography is its ability to capture unexpected moments, to give texture to the vibrancy of social life and the diversity of actors and opinions. My fieldwork experience was no exception. Offhand comments, interactions in public places, and surprising conversations bring to life the stories and narratives I collected in informal and semi-structured interviews. There was the time that I went to visit friends in a lower income neighborhood with a growing migrant population only to find “no more immigration” written in spray paint along a white wall running down their street. There were derisive jokes overheard on public transportation, often spoken loudly in the presence of migrants. There were the weekly wall-shaking rhythms of cumbia coming from house parties in my neighborhood. And there were a couple of rousing, impromptu conversations with Chilean colectivo drivers, some of who spoke passionately about the need for migrant labor and how migrants to Chile were just like their own relatives living in Spain and the U.S. As much as I sometimes longed for a clear delineation between work and rest, these experiences are the stuff of ethnography, the mark of being there, and the reason to pursue costly and time-intensive fieldwork. These experiences continue to give texture to and contextualize the rest of my data.

When I walked out of the restaurant on that Sunday, I remember feeling reassured that my research was addressing an issue that still needs to be analyzed, that the women’s conversation offered several insights to help frame my project, and that the discussion was likely indicative of what is going on in private spaces that I had only partial access to. I continued to revisit this conversation during fieldwork and as I later conducted interviews with Chilean participants. The ideas that felt so forcefully delivered in that overheard conversation were

echoed more subtly in private discussions. I came to think that these key moments are what make an ethnographic project, and that public conversations are part and parcel of being there and being a keen observer. These moments that we do not seek out, the feedback that we do not solicit, and the opinions that we are simply there for, present, and paying attention—it is for these reasons that we go to the field and these insights that enrich ethnographic data. Ethnographic fieldwork offers unexpected gems, and we have to be there to catch them.