When the Going Gets Weird: An Invitation to Gonzo Sociology

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Abstract This paper serves as a call to reinvigorate the practice of "gonzo sociology," an immersive, reflexive methodology which eschews rigidity and formulaic design in favor of innovative and imaginative research on places and peoples ignored by the academy. Employing an autoethnographic account of the author's experiences researching the reconstruction of the Iraqi police force, this paper serves as both an invitation and a rough how-to guide for gonzo research projects. While a variety of factors—ranging from funding sources to time constraints to anxiety to institutional review concerns—make this type of unorthodox research difficult, it is argued this is exactly what makes it both a necessary corrective to the staid formalism of the field as well as an avenue for incorporating the voices of those least represented in the academy.

Keywords Qualitative methods · Autoethnography · Conflict studies · Institutional review · Gonzo

Introduction

Passing through the third and final checkpoint to enter the heavily-fortified Iraqi police training academy my first day in the field, I couldn't help but marvel at how I had actually ended up there. Long fascinated with how police came to be as they are, but recognizing I'm not cut out for years of digging through musty old archives, my Ph.D. advisor suggested instead of studying it historically, I find a new force under construction to watch the process as it unfolded. We quickly realized this meant pretty much only Iraq or Afghanistan; so having a few tenuous connections to Iraq, I began a 3-year quest to get a first-row seat to the training of the new Iraqi police force. When it was over, I was left with a dissertation, a profoundly challenged view of who I am as a person and researcher, and an advocate of what I term gonzo sociology (cf Sefcovic 1995).

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Gonzo sociology draws its name from the practice known as gonzo journalism, most strongly associated with the works of Hunter Thompson (1979). Gonzo rose to prominence in the 1970s as part of "new journalism," a reaction against what were seen as the overly-staid practices of the field. Although never gaining a formalized ideology nor methodology, gonzo journalism relies heavily on first-hand narratives and the ethnographic immersion of the journalist, with significantly less concern for the detached style and reliance on third-party verification of traditional journalistic practices (Hirst 2004).

The exact origin of the term "gonzo" is unknown, and although there are a wide variety of claims to its creation, it has always stood to mean "brash, importunate, and flamboyant" (Tamony 1983). One biographer of Thompson claims it be a corruption of the word "gonzeaux," a French-Canadian term meaning "shining path," while another Thompson biographer claims it to be a expression South Boston Irish once used to describe the last person standing after a night of intense drinking (Mosser 2012). I employ the term as somewhat of a synthesis of these two definitions; while I don't claim gonzo sociology to necessarily be a shining path, a return to more participatory research would do the field well. Similarly, a gonzo approach to sociological research doesn't mean one has to be the last person standing at the end of the night, but it does require them to go to the pub (figuratively speaking, although gonzo researchers will likely see their share of literal pub visits as well).

From its inception, gonzo journalism emphasized not simply being a passive observer, but instead a fully-immersed participant (Jirón-King 2008; Tamony 1983). In a similar vein, gonzo sociology seeks to rejuvenate the wild, immersive side of the discipline, in the tradition of Becker, Adler, Mills, Whyte, etc. It seeks to "combine the art of the journalistic endeavor with the method and theory of the academy," rejecting notions of a privileged vantage point and instead emphasizing a participatory dimension (Sefcovic 1995). The aim is to revive an alternative to the domination of the field by narrow, conservative research questions in which "individualism and creativity become subordinate to efficiency" (Librett and Perrone 2010: 743). Perfectly capturing the gonzo spirit, Mills (1980) argued such focused, circumspect studies are fine for "those who are not able to handle the complexities of big problems" and for "highly formal men who do not care what they study so long as it appears to be orderly. All these types have a right to do as they please or as they must; they have no right to impose in the name of science such narrow limits on others" (67).

Although Mills lodged his complaint over 60 years ago, sociology is in many ways still dominated by "highly formal" scholars who view quantitative studies as the "real science" of the field (Mahoney and Goertz 2006; Westmarland 2001; Kleinman et al. 1997). While concerned with conducting high-quality scientific research, gonzo sociology eschews narrow methodological constraints and is instead to be measured by the "integrity of its concerns and not in the division of its labor" (O'Neill 1974: 11). The rigor of gonzo research stems not from rigid procedure and replicability, but from a reflexivity (Burawoy 1998; Sefcovic 1995) which produces novel research demonstrating a breadth of knowledge, possessing face and construct validity (Lather 1986).

Chief among the prescriptions of gonzo sociology is reclaiming the ethnographic imperative to get out there and do it (Trigger et al. 2012). Specifically, to those places sociologists fear to tread—the messy, complicated, and even dangerous areas of the world that hold so much as yet untapped information. The idea is not to throw all

inherited practice to the wind, but instead to embrace the immersive, bodily experience advocated by gonzo journalists. As Sefcovic (1995) argues, the gonzo researcher "need not emulate the worst in Thompson, but neither will she be constrained by abstract codes that have no relevance outside the scholarly professions" (33).

Gonzo sociology is thus both a theoretical and ideological movement, seeking to revive and reenergize the practice of employing multifaceted investigations to answer questions deemed outside the reach of mainstream sociological practices. A variety of factors, ranging from funding sources to time constraints to anxiety and self-doubt to (especially) institutional review board (IRB) concerns, coalesce to create significant pressure to not pursue innovative or risky research projects. While understandable, this has the latent consequence of excluding important voices from sociological research, often the voices of those already least represented in the academy (Green and Ward 2009; Vlassenroot 2005).

While this exclusion is typically presented as one of necessity, the gonzo perspective instead argues it is often one of convenience. The following is an autoethnographical account (Butz and Besio 2009; Spry 2001) of my experiences conducting and writing a gonzo dissertation on a multi-method study of an Iraqi police training academy. Although scholars have studied the police training process in Iraq, none have done so in person. In fact, two leading scholars in the area argued "to monitor instruction as it is given" is simply "not possible" (Bayley and Perito 2010:27). With all due respect to the important work of Bayley and Perito, my study demonstrates it is not only *possible* to directly monitor Iraqi police training, but that doing so provides incredibly rich detail and information not otherwise available.

As such, the goal of this paper is two-fold: to argue for the possibilities inherent in gonzo sociology, and to provide an overview of issues of concern for the budding gonzo sociologist. A "how to" guide is nigh impossible to provide (Sefcovic 1995), given the central tenant of gonzo sociology to follow the unpredictable twists and turns of investigation wherever they may go. Instead, using my own work as an example, this paper will lay out the many challenges, and hopefully rewards, that face the gonzo sociologist, from getting to the research site, gaining access, conducting the study, and reporting back to the profession and the public.

Science as Risk-Taking

The fundamental premise of this article, and the concept of gonzo sociology itself, is that science rarely fits into the orderly, linear steps of the idealized scientific method. As Merton and Barber (2004) argue, the standard of scientific publication "retroactively imposes logical form on the romance of investigation" (272), making it appear both systematic and organized, when in reality it is an often unpredictable, contentious, and generally messy process. Instead of allowing the "romance of investigation" to flourish, there is a great deal of institutional and professional pressure to conform to a routinized form of research in the pursuit of maximum publications, leading to a mode of knowledge in which "the product governs the process" (Burawoy 1998: 28).

In seeking to rekindle an alternative approach to research, gonzo sociology is heavily indebted to Robert Merton's work on the role of serendipity in scientific research (Merton and Barber 2004; Merton 1939, 1948). In tracing Horace Walpole's

neologism from its inception to modern usage, Merton demonstrates how the concept has long been central to the discovery of new scientific theories and truths. Although considering several meanings of the term throughout his writings, the definition most applicable to the gonzo enterprise is Merton's (1948) description of serendipity in research as "observing an *unanticipated, anomalous, and strategic* datum which becomes the occasion for developing a new theory or extending an existing theory" (506, emphasis in original).

This definition neatly encapsulates the gonzo experience in general, and especially as it applies to the work I will discuss in this article. The heart of my argument is that despite professional pressures such as tenure requirements, and institutional pressures, especially review boards, fruitful science simply cannot be routinized completely, but must always allow some space for unpredictable, exploratory work. As scientific inquiry is by definition a dynamic process, tendencies toward "compulsive tidiness" in methodology serve to prevent researchers from discovering the "fruitful surprises" (Merton and Barber 2004) of the field.

The Study

Data for this project was collected in Sulaimaniyah (Suly, as locals refer to the city), the intellectual and cultural capital of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), the semi-autonomous region of Northern Iraq. Although the majority of the population are Kurds with generational ties to the region, there is a sizeable minority of displaced persons from the more active conflict zones in "the South," as locals generically refer to the rest of the nation, as well as a growing Chinese immigrant population (Davies 2011). Kurds are an ethnic group distinct from the Arab peoples that largely populate the rest of the nation, yet they have similarly high levels of national pride and generally identify as Iraqis (Moaddel et al. 2008). Kurdistan provides at best a partial glimpse into the nation as a whole, making generalizations difficult, but these limitations are more than overcome by the practical advantages of Suly as a research site. Kurdistan has experienced little of the violence endemic to the South (Green and Ward 2009), making it arguably the safest entree point for examining larger, national processes.

The bulk of the data was collected at the Sulaimaniyah Police Lead Training Academy. Founded in 2003 by coalition forces, the academy is one of six regional training centers in Iraq and has, as of 2011, trained over 35,000 police, accounting for roughly 1/5th of all Iraqi police. While the academy originally took in recruits from throughout the nation, over the past few years it has become more exclusively Kurdish as other regions of the nation have become stable enough to host their own training facilities.

I attended academy courses 4 days a week for the entirety of the "theoretical" training each day, usually between 2 and 3 h (recruits also undergo a physical training each morning, consisting of the same repeated calisthenics). Academy staff were incredibly welcoming and open, even encouraging me to interrupt lessons should I have questions (though to minimize the disruptiveness of my presence, I never did). These ethnographic observations were supplemented by 48 interviews with trainers and recruits at the academy, as well as a survey of slightly under 100 new recruits. The other principal research site was an ongoing, major anti-corruption demonstration, loosely part of the Middle East spring of 2011 (although most sources use the term "Arab

Spring" to refer to the political upheaval of the region during this period, the movements were comprised of people of many ethnicities, so I employ the more inclusive "Middle East spring" to reflect that diversity).

Getting There

A more accurate title for this section might be "being allowed to go," as the majority of difficulty I experienced in getting this project off the ground came during the long journey of securing institutional approval, something common for gonzo projects (Librett and Perrone 2010; Swauger 2009). Many scholars (Sandberg and Copes 2012; Trigger et al. 2012; Hessler et al. 2011; Heimer and Petty 2010; Gunsalas et al. 2006) argue IRBs exist more to protect institutions from legal liability than to promote earnest self-reflection regarding ethical considerations, and in doing so have come to focus far more on procedural rather than ethical concerns.

Institutional review forces investigators, experts in their subject field, to petition a committee likely containing no experts in the field, for permission to conduct their study (Martin and Ingwood 2012). Review board considerations are almost invariably developed with positivist research models influenced by biomedical designs; such models are at best irrelevant for ethnographers, and often present one of the most significant obstacles to a project (Sandberg and Copes 2012; Jacobson et al. 2007). In gonzo sociology, the IRB will likely present the biggest hurdle, both through their understandable lack of knowledge about the particular situation, and through positivist demands for detailed research plans rarely known (or even knowable) to the researcher, especially for those conducting investigations in unstable or little-tread locales (Jacobson et al. 2007).

In seeking approval for my project, my inability to answer fully the intensive series of questions from the IRB and international travel assessment committees stemmed from models which assume a middle-class, white American experience (Swauger 2009) and have little flexibility to account for regional, ethnic, religious, and other major cultural forces which impact communication. The arduous work of collecting official approval and permission from various officials didn't meaningfully aid my research, but instead presented a significant hurdle to clear that delayed my progress and put strains on my budding research relationships.

Most of the time on my first trip to Suly took the form of long meetings over *chai* with various officials, facilitated by my principal research informant. Discussion of my work was typically a secondary concern; instead meetings were usually long, rambling discussions lasting several hours and ranging on topics as diverse as religion, politics, food, and music. This is the common mode of conducting business in Iraq, as personal connections fostered in these conversations are more important than formal discussions of particulars. Trying to secure written approval during such meetings, I was told this was unnecessary—after all, had they not just pledged their support for my project? What would a piece of paper do for me that their personal assurance could not? Yet to satisfy institutional review, I had to pressure my contacts for formal, written approval, and it was clear they felt a mixture of confusion and hurt at my insistence. Although I was eventually able to secure written documentation of approval from all necessary parties, it was obvious this was perceived as a sign of distrust from me, and required a fair amount of relationship repairing, time that could have otherwise been devoted to my research.

Beyond the strains that came from failing to recognize cultural differences, it was also incredibly difficult to force my proposal into the positivist mode required of institutional review, specifically in having to supply a detailed research plan that is rarely possible for gonzo sociology. For example, the review board needed to know if and how I would incorporate female recruits in my study. Although there is not space here to fully detail the fluid and complex gender dynamics of Iraq, suffice it to say there are strong cultural regulations regarding most interactions of men and women. Asking to interview female recruits in private would have required significantly more personal capital than I was able to wield at that point in my relationships with key officials. Yet because institutional approval requires detailed and definitive responses, I was forced to exclude female recruits from my official study design. Although I was eventually able to build enough rapport with officials at the academy to have likely been able to receive permission to interview women, my institutionally approved research plan prevented me from exploring a fascinating aspect of the force.

These intensive requirements are burdensome not only for the amount of unnecessary work they foist upon the gonzo researcher, but also because they can have a chilling effect on research in general (Heimer and Petty 2010; Carpenter 2007; Jacobson et al. 2007). While few projects are rejected outright by institutional review boards (Gunsalas et al. 2006), guidelines push researchers from genuinely interesting paths of inquiry to "safer" studies, or to never propose innovative research in the first place (Carpenter 2007). Onerous requirements have the further effect of silencing the voices of the most marginalized by making the marginalized the most difficult to study (Swauger 2009). A central impetus of my project was to actually *be* there; to see first-hand what happens in Iraqi police training, and more importantly, to hear what the training and its ideals meant to the police themselves. The goal was not only to provide insight into sociological and criminological debates, but to bring the voices of Iraqi police into a debate that's been *about* them, but rarely ever included them. While I did not experience a chilling effect to the point of abandoning my project, I was subject to multiple setbacks mostly overcome through a bull-headed stubborn desire to prove people wrong (not necessarily an admirable trait in life, but one that serves the gonzo sociologist well).

My position at the time as a graduate student cannot be ignored as possibly the greatest factor influencing my ability to complete the project. Having no family and being perfectly content as an impoverished graduate student, time was the sole luxury I possessed, making the cumbersome delays of institutional approval merely a frustrating, obnoxious, and disempowering hurdle to clear. Were I not young and single with no major financial obligations, had I not been lucky enough to find sufficient adjunct instruction work to stay afloat, and had I not had the luxury of no particular timeline for finishing, things would have been incredibly different. In short, had I not had a multitude of privileges, basic self-interest would have dictated abandoning the project.

In fairness to the review boards whose approval I had to obtain, the majority of their concerns centered on my physical safety during field work. While obviously a reasonable concern for anyone conducting research in conflict zones, it became clear this was less in the interest of my safety than in sheltering the institution from possible legal reprisal (Heimer and Petty 2010). As Hessler et al argue, many institutional review boards have "substituted concern for research subjects with anxiety about legal risk that

social science research might pose for the academy" (150). In addition to the extensiveness of the information demanded of me, the incredibly basic nature of many of the questions I was asked to provide documented answers to at best reflected an extreme lack of knowledge regarding the non-Western world, and at times bordered upon the racist and xenophobic.

I was asked to prove that I would have access to the most basic provisions of human life; documentation was required to demonstrate I would have access to medical care, communications, and evacuation plans covering every possible mode of transportation. This despite the fact that the KRG is a prosperous and largely peaceful region, and Suly itself a cosmopolitan city (Davies 2011; Green and Ward 2009). While compiling news reports on local hospitals to prove access to medical care, I was reminded of a colleague who conducts research in Africa. She explains that sometimes the hardest aspect of teaching students about Africa is that it is a cultural object that remains stuck in the past to most Americans; thus she is compelled to remind the students that it is the same year in Africa as it is in America. I similarly felt compelled (though never gathered the courage) to report to the IRB that I was only travelling overseas, not back in time.

What makes requirements to prove access to the basic necessities of life truly problematic is not simply the understandable cultural ignorance upon which they're based (indeed, it would be difficult for a review board to have members familiar with *every* region of the world), but the assumptions about Iraqi culture and society which flow from it reveal an incredibly problematic xenophobic undercurrent. While I understand "trust me, it's fine" should not be considered adequate evidence, forcing those who seek to conduct innovative studies to prove the existence of basic civil society is both onerous and alienating.

This was most evident in the institution's continuing concern over the possibility of a terrorist attack, despite Suly never experiencing anywhere near the levels of violence endemic to the South and despite the fact that that I had already provided examples of other Western academics who conducted studies in the region without complication (e.g. Green and Ward 2009). As a close friend in Suly put it, statistically speaking one is more likely to fall victim to a terrorist attack in New York City than in Suly. Again, concern about potential violence in Iraq is obviously not out of line, but it is hard to imagine someone proposing research in New York being subject to nearly as many questions about their physical safety (Vanketesh 2002). Not to mention that, in the field, I was regularly surrounded by armed law enforcement; as the director of the academy explained to me, somewhat perplexed by my request for documentation proving my safety, "this academy is the safest place in all of Iraq! Even American military officials do not bring guns with them here, they feel so safe."

The extensive institutional review process not only significantly delayed my project, it ironically meant I had far less time to ponder the important ethical considerations I actually encountered. This is not uncommon, as many of the demands of institutional review have no meaningful ethical bases (Gunsalas et al. 2006), and consequential questions of ethics are often avoided in favor of narrow questions of legal liability (Swauger 2009). The sad irony of the review process is that I ran into multiple difficult ethical grey areas in my field work of which a thoughtful contemplation could have been immensely useful. Alas, I was too busy documenting the existence of civil society in Iraq to delve into these issues.

Funding (Be Prepared to Get a Second Job)

Those preparing to undertake gonzo investigation should be fully aware that the attempt to find funding will be just as fraught with delays, significant extra documentation, and xenophobic dismissals of the possibility or desirability of entering the field as was the institutional review process. Many funding agencies assume a lack of security in conflict areas and other more-precarious locations will inevitably limit the researcher's ability to collect valid data, thus leading them to increasingly reject such proposals (Vlassenroot 2005).

My experience speaks to this process—of the two dozen or so funding agencies from which I sought assistance, the perceived impossibility of the project was invariably central to the rejection. Frustratingly, most feedback spoke positively of the groundwork I had laid, but concluded the project was unlikely to be completed. While my own inabilities to compile a satisfactory funding application no doubt played a part in the rejections, it's difficult not to see many of the same problematic assumptions and lacunae in the funding rejections as I encountered in the institutional review process.

Similarly, the reticence of funding agencies to grant research money to gonzo projects results in a chilling effect on future research. The very factors that make such research risky (potential safety hazards, little previous scientific exploration of the area, etc.) are precisely the factors which make such projects so valuable. Specific to my research, it is the very fluid and volatile nature of conflict zones that make them such a rich data source. When funding is not forthcoming for such studies, our knowledge of the region/conflict/process under study is thereby reduced to pre-conflict studies, leaving the dynamics of the conflict itself misunderstood or completely unknown (Vlassenroot 2005).

Yet reducing our knowledge of the world is not the only way this dearth of funding for gonzo research reinforces problematic existing power hierarchies. While I was able to garner a token amount of funding through small grants and departmental funds, these in no way amounted to enough to fund even a truncated version of the project. Consequently, I ended up having to self-fund nearly the entire project, mainly with extra income earned from taking on multiple adjunct teaching positions and a variety of odd jobs in addition to my graduate teaching load. Similar to the time and effort required to gain institutional approval, the lack of funding significantly delayed the project. Again, were I not young and residing near the top of most every privilege hierarchy, it would have been prohibitively difficult to finish my project. Therein lies the double-whammy of institutional reticence to approve and fund gonzo research—it both limits our knowledge of the historically disenfranchised, while simultaneously limiting the pool of researchers able to study historically disenfranchised populations to those who have the privilege and ability not to have to worry about time, money, or much in life other than their study.

Gaining Access

The very point of gonzo sociology is to get out where others have not, so by definition one has to create their own trail (Trigger et al. 2012). Yet there are more than a few

lessons to derive from my struggles, especially surrounding ethical considerations of access to the field. Although the dilemmas encountered will be different in each project, I strongly second the advice of Sandberg and Copes (2012) to craft "standing decisions" about ethical concerns before entering the field.

While I was able to secure "official" approvals, getting these depended on using unofficial means. Time and space do not allow me to cover the complex socio-cultural history of Iraq, but while many of the actions of my principal informants might register as corruption (or at least an abuse of authority) to a Western viewer, they were generally far more complicated than the direct violation of formal rules or laws the term implies. Rather, there are significant cultural differences between how Iraqis and Americans conduct professional relationships; to oversimplify it, being connected to the right people is not only helpful, but essential, for everything ranging from government services to employment to housing to where one shops.

Fortunately, early on in the project I was introduced to Dr. Nwenar (name changed to preserve anonymity). In addition to holding a position of prominence at a local university, Dr. Nwenar is an elder son in a politically-connected family. Professional and familial ranks afford him access to the highest levels of power in the region, and he was never hesitant to employ these connections for my sake. My central standing decision, then, was I would allow myself to rely on Dr. Nwenar's connections only when absolutely necessary. Similar to Vanketesh's (2002) decision to patronize harmless aspects of the informal economy (e.g. unlicensed car repair) and avoid the dangerous and illegal (e.g. helping move illegal narcotics), I would first attempt access through official public channels, and only after exhausting those would I rely on the informal. Furthermore, I would only use such connections to gain access to gatekeepers and others in powerful positions, never to impose my agenda on those in low power or status positions. Two situations surrounding securing a long-term visa illustrate how and why I came to this decision.

The KRG limits foreign nationals to a 10-day visa, so to stay in Suly for several months requires a special waiver. Knowing the speed at which bureaucracies move, I mailed my application, letters of support from a local university, a local NGO, and multiple police officials, as well as my passport, to the embassy several months in advance. As my departure date approached and I had yet to hear anything, I began calling and e-mailing the embassy on a daily basis, failing to make contact with anyone. Although speculative (albeit based on extensive experience with Iraqi bureaucracies), I have a strong feeling the embassy was staffed not by professional bureaucrats, but people who had been rewarded with a plum assignment because of familial or political connections.

Regardless of the cause of the delay, it was not until 2 weeks before I was set to leave that I was at last able to make contact with an embassy official, who let me know he was still waiting to hear back from his superiors and had no idea when word would come. At this point, I decided out of necessity I would have to forgo the official process and try my luck once I arrived (the number of commercial flights into Iraq is fairly low, making them both expensive and incredibly difficult to reschedule). After a series of frustrating and nerve-wracking, though in retrospect fairly amusing, mishaps, including a tense trip to the local passport office to get an emergency replacement roughly 3 h before my flight, I was finally on my way back to Iraq.

Arriving on the maximum 10-day visa, I set out to secure an extension on my own. After 5 h at the immigration control office being bounced from one bureaucrat to another, it was finally decided (by whom I don't know) I could be approved for only a 2-week extension. Being devastating news to someone depending on a several-month stay to collect the bulk of the data for his dissertation, I tried my best to appeal to the sympathies of the staff on duty, but it was made clear this was out of their hands and there was nothing they could do.

It was at this point, having exhausted every official channel available to me, I decided this qualified as a necessity under my standing decision. So after this exhausting morning, I called Dr. Nwenar and he soon joined me at the immigration office. Within 5 min of his arrival we were whisked away to the office of the director, where we spent a while chatting and drinking *chai*. At the end of our conversation, one of the director's subordinates came in with a few forms for me to sign and informed me I was now approved for a 6-month stay and simply needed to call the director's office should I need another extension.

While there are many similar examples I could provide, the experience of securing a visa illustrates both the ethical grey area in which I was operating and how I feel my standing decision regarding corruption allays some ethical concerns. To begin with, this was not a flippant turn to potentially unethical methods; not only had I exhausted all official channels, I am fully convinced there was no other way for me to acquire the visa (during my time in the field I met multiple other foreign nationals who tried to get visa extensions and each was denied). Additionally, visas generally not being a zero-sum proposition, I can be fairly confident no one was harmed or in any way deprived by my extension.

Of course, gaining access was not simply a matter of befriending Dr. Nwenar, central as he may have been to many important connections; another major factor that cannot be ignored is my position as a white American male. Again, while the gender relations of Iraq are far more complicated than simplistic popular notions, it is unlikely I would have ever been able to achieve such intimate access to trainers and recruits were I not male bodied. Beyond my biological sex, my status as a white American proved to be central to opening doors in my research.

One of the largest differences between residents of the KRG and those of the rest of Iraq is that Kurds display significantly higher approval of both Americans and the invasion (Inglehart et al. 2006). These positive feelings toward Americans provided yet another important opening of questionable ethical standing: a significant number of recruits and trainers assumed me to be in a far more important position of power than I actually was. While initially laughable to me as a graduate student working on a project no one would fund, it eventually dawned on me how much sense this made from their perspective; there are few white Americans in the region, fewer still that do not work for a major NGO, and none that visit the training academy (save a few US military officials on rare occasion). Thus, the formally-attired American silently observing training sessions must have appeared as someone in a position of some importance.

While some of this misperception was indeed humorous (occasionally I would be asked to take up a specific issue with Paul Bremer or President Obama when next I spoke to them), it raised ethical concerns regarding consent I had not been prepared to deal with. Several times at the end of the day, the trainer in charge would ask me if he had led the lesson correctly. I used such opportunities to explain that I was not there to

evaluate or pass judgment, but that I simply wanted to observe and hear what they knew, trying my best to position them as the experts and I as the student. I took great pains to emphasize I had no power to compel their participation and that I had no affiliation with the US military, government, or their own superiors. Although I feel I did about as much as I could to make my own position and their rights as clear as possible, it's difficult to believe that a general perception of me as some sort of important government official didn't color the general willingness to participate in my project in at least some way.

The Exploratory Visit

Taking all of these issues together, the most helpful piece of advice I offer regarding access is whenever possible to take an initial exploratory, non-research trip to the research site. Although all visits to the field are research in the sense they broaden understanding of important contextual information, exploratory trips in which no "official" research takes place don't require institutional approval. This allows one to sidestep temporarily the lengthy review process (and for gonzo sociology it will always be a *lengthy* process), while simultaneously allowing for the kinds of connections and understandings to arise that will significantly aid in both the research process as well as in the eventual institutional review.

In some ways, an exploratory visit is essential in terms of crafting plausible research questions and designs for gonzo projects with little precedent. Simply spending time in the area in which one plans to conduct field work forces a meaningful contemplation of matters both practical (Where will I stay? How much will this cost? Whom can I turn to for help?) and theoretical/programmatic (What kind of access will I actually be able to get? Who is and isn't willing to talk to me? How much of what I can observe here will bear upon my research questions?).

Exploratory visits are invaluable in crafting the standing decisions (Sandberg and Copes 2012) one must make when opening new field sites for research. To return to the corruption example, academic and journalistic reports on Iraq left me with a fairly good understanding of the pervasiveness of corruption. However, it was not until I experienced these practices that I understood the complicated form corruption actually took and was forced to reconsider what were a naïve set of beliefs regarding how I would respond to it (e.g. that I could simply choose not to participate in anything I viewed as potentially corrupt). Subsequent conversations with locals confirmed the necessity of participation in such quasi-corrupt activities to accomplish anything, and led me to refine my simplistic assumptions into my eventual decision of refusing only the illicit exchange of money or any favors that would negatively impact others. An exploratory visit will never fully inform one of all potential ethical concerns, but it will reduce the number of potential surprises and introduce issues that must be considered before returning to the field.

The exploratory trip is not limited to understanding ethical concerns, but it also facilitates appreciation of the folkways of the field site. Because of my lack of experience in the region, I initially relied quite heavily on the advice of the small American staff of a local NGO. While I remain incredibly grateful for their assistance and guidance, the exploratory visit helped me to understand they were operating in a vastly different institutional environment. For instance, I was advised to hire a driver, as taxicabs presented a dangerous potential for kidnapping. I quickly learned this advice

was based not as much on the possibility of abduction (real, but quite minimal) but instead more so on the fact that an NGO with a multi-million dollar budget can afford to expend large amounts of money on private transport to assuage the omnipresent American desire to avoid legal liability. I actually found Iraqi cabs to be not only cost effective, but often a great source of information regarding important local persons and institutions. Similarly I had been advised to avoid the city's central bazaar, again for what became clear were legal liability concerns much more so than actual safety issues. Much like the taxis, I found sojourns to the bazaar to be some of the most illuminating (and enjoyable) moments of my time in the field.

Furthermore, as important as it is for researchers to understand participants, it is equally important for those being studied to understand and accept the researcher. Potential gonzo research participants are not accustomed to being studied and likely have a wide variety of concerns and reservations about some stranger asking to be accepted into their community. As such, the importance of face-to-face connections in gonzo sociology cannot be overstated. These populations often exist outside of dominant Western constructs of authority and hierarchy, and generally place a premium on personal relationships over deference to official authority and institutional prestige. In my short, 2-week exploratory visit I was able to make more meaningful contacts and secure more access than I had been able to do in over a year of phone calls and e-mails.

Finally, one of the best ways to achieve the acceptance of potential research participants is simply learning the language, even if it is not a distinct language in the literal sense (Vanketesh 2002; Addams 1999). I was unable to learn the language to fluency due to its obscurity (Sorani Kurdish is spoken only in the KRG); however, I strove as much as possible to learn greetings, basic conversational phrases, and other social niceties. As others who have studied populations outside of their language capabilities attest (Addams 1999), even minor attempts to learn the language are often met with enthusiasm and appreciation. Although only able to attain basic conversational abilities, I was frequently humbled by how warmly and appreciatively my pathetic, halting usage of Sorani was received.

Conducting the Research

Gonzo sociology maintains a focus on outcomes, privileging the collection of interesting and relevant data over concerns of methodological rigor and replicability. In place of the scientific value that follows from strict methodology, the value of gonzo sociology is measured by the creation of novel insights gleaned from unexplored research sites. What follows in this section are general points on both the personal and professional concerns gonzo researchers can expect to face.

Personal Concerns

The simultaneous beauty and terror of the gonzo enterprise is drawn from its core mission: exploring those places and peoples other researchers have not. This comes with wonderful freedom—having no precedent means few constraining expectations and assumptions—but can also be incredibly lonely and alienating; not only is there no precedent to follow, but colleagues may think one foolish for trying in the first place.

This dialectic of freedom and anxiety makes the gonzo experience an incredibly emotional one. Especially during early periods in the field, feelings of loneliness and isolation are the most intense to manage (Davies and Spencer 2010; Kleinman and Copp 1993; Malinowski 1922). Not only are participants not accustomed to being the objects of study, but the lack of previous scholars in that particular field means there will generally be no one to aid with issues of access or local resources. Journal notes from my first several weeks in the field indicate I was clearly experiencing an intense awareness of being on my own for any and all problems that might arise.

This profound loneliness came not only from the physical isolation of being a foreigner living by himself, something I anticipated and could somewhat prepare for, but also through the isolation inherent in the difficulties of cross-cultural and cross-linguistic barriers (Addams 1999). As someone with little experience being both an ethnic and linguistic minority, I was unprepared for how alienating it is to not be able to employ much of my regular vocabulary, especially for a pop-culture obsessive who can rarely finish a conversation without referencing a film or television show. My inability to express myself as I usually would contributed to a significantly more profound alienation that I had anticipated experiencing.

Yet the most surprising factor contributing to the loneliness was that although there is great excitement in exploring an area and culture little studied, there is also a significant amount of boredom to be managed. While somewhat embarrassing to admit, even after my initial visit I harbored bracingly naïve, romanticized notions of the excitement of life in a conflict zone. Instead, extreme levels of boredom marked my time not spent conducting research, especially before I was able to form an ad hoc social circle of ex-pats and English-speaking locals.

While obviously everyone will have their own ways of managing isolation and alienation, I strongly recommend keeping a personal journal alongside formal field notes. Not only for the positive mental health effects (Ullrich and Lutgendorf 2002), but for free writing without the constraints of fealty to data. In a reflexive science such as gonzo sociology, such unfettered reflections can form an important data point themselves (Burawoy 1998). On a more practical level, I suggest bringing as many books and movies as possible. No matter how involved one's research program is, the nature of fieldwork ensures there will undoubtedly be extended periods of downtime. Had it not been for the technology enabling me to bring such a large variety of media with me, it would have been incredibly difficult to manage the isolation that comes from such extended periods of inactivity.

Finally, along with this alienation and isolation there is likely to be a significant amount of anxiety, especially early on in one's time in the field. Because my fieldwork was incredibly expensive and Iraq is a relatively difficult nation to access (as will be most sites sought by the gonzo researcher), I was seriously concerned about my ability to collect enough data during my time in the field. While anxieties felt by the gonzo researcher are context-specific, it helps to remember everything is data. Although a frustrating and slow-moving process, my string of meetings with government officials to gain official approval for access taught me a great deal about the nature of the organization's hierarchy, as such resistance "discloses much about the core values and interests of its members" (Burawoy 1998: 17). It quickly became obvious each particular official had no problem with my research plans, but clearly knew if a superior did they would be in a significant amount of trouble. This bureaucratic and political

dependency, and especially fear of reprisal, helped to explain a significant amount of behavior I observed at the academy.

The Centrality of Flexibility

Successfully conducting gonzo research means above all working with flexibility; the very nature of the places and people under study means things like access, contacts, and research plans are nearly always contingent. Be prepared to triangulate data from as many sources as possible, both to gain a more complete picture of the field, and on the assumption that much of your plan will either not come to fruition or have to be significantly shifted in focus/scope. Simply put, one has to forgo standard research protocols (e.g. Vanketesh 2002), and abandon any notion of positivistic models of hypothesis-data collection-results (Marx 1997).

Often, factors forcing changes to the project are not only out of the researcher's control, but out of the control of anyone. For me, a major change was prompted by my period in the field coinciding with the Middle East Spring and Suly experiencing major daily demonstrations for several months. This obviously created significant difficulties for studying the police. The President of the region declared a state of emergency (Kurd Net 2011) and academy operations were suspended for over a month as trainers were pulled from classes to aid in crowd-control efforts.

This development neatly encapsulates the perils and promise of gonzo sociology. My principal research site shutting down for a long stretch during my limited time in the field was a dispiriting development, yet it ended up becoming an amazing opportunity to expand my study in ways I had not conceived of prior to entering the field. For one, it left students and trainers still at the academy with basically nothing to do during their workday, making scheduling and conducting interviews much easier and allowing me to conduct significantly more than originally planned.

More importantly, the demonstrations opened an entirely new site of great relevance. As a focus of my research is how police understand and enact their role in the creation of a constitutional democracy, seeing them in action during a major, sustained political demonstration provided an incredibly fruitful comparison point for the rhetoric of police regarding civil and political rights. The demonstrations also provided wonderful immediate, concrete examples for interviews, and allowed myself and research participants to contrast our experiences at the academy and out on the streets during the demonstrations.

The disruption was not all positive, though, as it meant I was not able to observe nearly as many training courses as I had initially intended. A major course that was to have been completed in full during my time there did not actually begin until 2 weeks before I left. Under the gonzo motto that any data is better than no data, I cobbled together a survey culled from what had proven to be my most fruitful interview questions. While time constraints made it far from an expertly-crafted survey, it has provided insights into a large number of research participants I otherwise never would have been able to speak with.

Learn When to Ignore Sound Advice

A corollary to "any data is better than no data" is "everything encountered is data." It then follows the more one encounters the more data one will have, so gonzo

sociologists should ignore conventional wisdom and get off the beaten path as much as possible. Obviously one should use their best judgment about safety and other concerns, but recognize official recommendations about where is off limits are often far more conservative than they need be. Generally, once established within a research site, the gonzo researcher should have a pretty good feel for what places and people are truly to be avoided and which will make for great additions to the study and they can thus trust their instincts on where to go and with whom to talk (Sandberg and Copes 2012). As Merton and Barber remind us in their discussion of serendipity, "reluctance to accept uncertainty limits the scope of available rewards" (2004: 190).

Ignoring conventional wisdom and allowing space for serendipity is where the most interesting stories originate. For the sake of space, I'll share two that represent opposite ends of the spectrum from mundane to exciting. Both provided great data in both the broad and narrow senses—I was able to observe situations directly related to the central goals of my research, but more broadly, they led to a greater understanding of the region, culture, common expressions, and a multitude of other contextual factors which shed light on multiple aspects of my "official" data.

On the mundane end, visiting tea and *nargile* shops, and wandering through the bazaar became one of my best vehicles for insights into Kurdish society and peoples. Although Suly is a major, cosmopolitan city, the bazaar is still very much the heart of the city, geographically and symbolically. While both the American consulate and the NGO with which I was affiliated strongly advised against going there, it quickly became apparent this was based far more on fears of liability than actual danger. In fact, I soon found my status as a white American actually provided me a significant amount of protection. Between the KRG attempting to establish itself as a tourist destination (Beehner 2008) and my connections to important local officials, my visibility as one of a very few white Westerners in the city "raised the cost…of hostility" (Wood 2006: 379) toward me.

On the more exciting end of the spectrum, I was similarly warned to avoid the demonstrations at all costs. Despite some scattered incidences of violence (Arango and Schmidt 2011), a combination of curiosity, hard-headedness, and the gonzo spirit conspired to push me to the demonstrations. Although there was certainly a greater chance of encountering danger than existed in wandering the bazaar, once again common sense and trusting my instincts regarding these types of situations more than sufficed (Sandberg and Copes 2012). As happens in many such large-scale demonstrations, it became clear which areas were safe and which put one in close contact with security forces. Similarly, nearly every outbreak of violence was preceded by a massive influx of security personnel and a palpable tension, making it easy to understand when self-preservation dictated heading home for the day. Obviously such situations are highly fluid and contextually dependent, so your mileage may vary, but I would have missed out on a significant amount of important data had I not ignored conventional wisdom and allowed space for serendipitous discoveries.

Relationships with Respondents

Relationships between researcher and respondent in gonzo sociology are far afield of conventional research, and differentials in power assumed by review boards are not nearly as straightforward; when collecting data, especially in conflict areas, gonzo

researchers can easily find themselves occupying a weaker role in the power dynamic (Martin and Ingwood 2012). In the very least, given that gonzo sociologists seek to immerse themselves in the participants' world to understand and give voice to their reality, respondents are rarely in a position of dependence on the researcher (Jacobson et al. 2007). The a priori assumption that research participants are necessarily in a weaker position, in danger of being exploited, can actually be quite patronizing (VanderStaay 2005; Addams 1999; Sefcovic 1995).

Due to the difficulty of access in gonzo sociology, researchers are especially dependent on informants, and informants will often have their own uses for the researcher (Vlassenroot 2005; Vanketesh 2002; Addams 1999; Sefcovic 1995). Many informants took advantage of what they viewed as my prestigious Western credentials. Dr. Newnar would regularly ask me to join him in meetings in which it quickly became clear my presence was desired not for anything I might learn or contribute, but simply for the prestige that comes from having a white American academic in tow. I was more than willing to oblige because of both our friendship and his invaluable research assistance (even in a few traditional 4 a.m. breakfasts, a truly herculean effort for a night owl like myself). Smiling silently through hours-long meetings in which I could barely follow the conversation was indeed a small price to pay for Dr. Nwenar's assistance. However, to imply that the wealthy scion of a powerful family parading me around to demonstrate his importance was somehow the powerless one in that situation is hard to reconcile.

This is, of course, not to belittle the very real ethical concerns of the gonzo sociologist in relation to research participants, but instead to make the point that the gonzo sociologist will likely vacillate between being the more and less powerful member of any particular interaction. Beyond demands on my time from informants, more material demands were regularly made of me. Most of these stemmed from understandable, albeit incorrect, assumptions about the resources I command as a white American. As mentioned, nearly all Americans in the region work for NGOs, typically with sizeable budgets. For this reason, most people I interacted with assumed I too was working with a significant budget, and would negotiate with me as such. In nearly all financial transactions I became subject to what local ex-pats jokingly refer to as the "white guy tax." Even those I worked closely with refused to believe I could not afford to pay the same rates as the NGOs.

Yet tallying up instances of when I was in a more or less powerful position is beside the point, as gonzo sociology aims to transcend such binary notions and instead focus on a collaborative, mutually beneficial production of knowledge (Sandberg and Copes 2012; Jacobson et al. 2007; Sefcovic 1995). Given my earlier experiences interviewing American police, with their reticence to share information and their suspicion of my intentions, I was continually surprised at how accommodating Iraqi police were to my inquiries. In fact, once my presence and research agenda become known around the academy, it was not at all uncommon for trainers and students alike to demand to know why they had not yet been interviewed and to insist we find a time to speak immediately.

As became clear through such requests, and the content of those interviews, these respondents viewed my research as a chance for the world to hear their story, an experience likely common to those researching less visible populations. While the voices of all Iraqis have been conspicuously absent from discussions in the West, the Kurdish people have been especially invisible, a fact not lost upon them. It was also

clear that many respondents enjoyed the perceived status that comes from being viewed as someone knowledgeable enough to be interviewed. It is this kind of symbiotic relationship for which gonzo sociology strives; while the parties involved may not all reap the same level of benefits, they all feel valued in the process. As Sefcovic (1995) argues, the research project can empower research participants "as an act in itself," as serving as an informant "affirms the significance of the individual's observations, opinions, lifestyles, et." (30).

These intangible benefits are typically invisible to institutional views of costs and benefits in research. In most such schemata, interviews are seen as *at best* not causing harm, yet participants often derive a great deal of personal and/or political satisfaction from the interview process (Sandberg and Copes 2012; Wood 2006). While these nuances to the ethics/consent paradigm are rarely recognized institutionally, they are central concerns for the gonzo researcher. Hessler et al. (2011) go so far as to argue for a moratorium on IRB review of social science research, replacing the rigid standard of informed consent with a more fluid least-harm approach in which researchers and participants negotiate rights and obligations directly with one another. Similarly, Sefcovic (1995) argues that unless research participants are genuinely incapable of granting consent, we must trust their decision to enter into the research partnership. In this kind of in-depth, lived research, consent is not a one-time issue granted through a signed form, but rather a process in which trust is earned over a time of shared living and constant dialogue (Carpenter 2007; Jacobson et al. 2007; Ramcharan and Cutcliffe 2001). So while I do not have a folder of signed forms indicating the consent of my participants, I can point to their demands to be involved in the research and exhortations to relate their stories to the rest of the world as evidence that the respondents in this study fully consented.

Reporting it Back

The final area of ethical and professional concern lies in reports drawn from gonzo research. Unlikely to be addressed by institutional review, reporting on oft-ignored sites and peoples is fraught with peculiar difficulties. Chief amongst these, gonzo researchers must be conscious of avoiding "conflict fetish" (Vlassenroot 2005: 193), that is, the assumption that the violent, dangerous, or otherwise unstable nature of the area is the only lens through which to view the lives of research participants. Instead, there is an onus on the gonzo researcher to demystify the worlds of their research participants, taking extra care not to exoticise the people or locale.

As Iraq remains principally a news item to many Americans, many audiences (academic and lay) simply want to hear crazy stories about life in a war-torn land. While acknowledging the instability in many areas, I strive to make it clear such instability is hardly uniform, affecting different populations to very different degrees, and that even for those directly affected by the instability, it remains only one aspect of their lives. An anecdote I use to illustrate this is my first experience with live gunfire. While the demonstrations took up the center square of the town's bazaar, the rest of it remained a bustling hub of commerce and conversation. One day early in the run of the demonstrations

I was sitting outside a teashop, sipping *chai* and absent-mindedly watching people haggle with street vendors. Suddenly I could make out the distinctive pop of AK fire, loud enough that it had to be within a few hundred feet. None of the shoppers, vendors, nor anyone else on the street I could see even bothered to glance in the direction of what was unmistakably nearby live gunfire. It was an incredibly forceful reminder that such factors which might to an outsider appear as if they would dominate the thoughts and concerns of people may in actuality simply be another aspect of their daily life.

Similarly, it is incumbent upon the gonzo sociologist to understand the perceptions of their participants in the popular mind and to balance a need for accurate portrayals with sensitivity to those who have welcomed you into their worlds. For example, the inescapable conclusion of my work is that the reconstruction effort is going poorly and will not produce officers prepared for policing a constitutional democracy. Yet such a narrative requires great care, as a number of people are more than happy to jump on anything that makes Iraqis appear foolish, incompetent, or less developed than their Western counterparts. Although following the gonzo dictate to not edit out the "deformities" of real life (Jirón-King 2008: 3), I take special care to emphasize the structural and ideological limitations of the training process and reconstruction effort which make it untenable. Rather than focusing on failures of Iraqi police, I work to carefully balance the difficulties experienced by police against structural forces far outside of their control.

The final challenge for both researchers and audiences is how to evaluate the knowledge produced. A number of scholars have argued that the rigor of qualitative methodologies lies not in fixed procedures or replicability, but instead in sound research strategies producing work demonstrating depth of knowledge and resonance with the issues at hand (Jacobson et al. 2007; Burawoy 1998; Sefcovic 1995). As Merton and Barber (2004) remind us, serendipitous findings of the gonzo researcher are never purely accidental discoveries, but instead require a refined scientific understanding to identify, process, and act upon them. Similarly, the gonzo approach is not one of blindly wandering about until data is discovered, but instead one of leaving space for random chance and serendipity, with the knowledge that "the weight of evaluation lies with the product" (Burawoy 1998: 20) produced.

To that end, I endorse an approach similar to Lather's (1986) guide for establishing validity in openly ideological research. Noting that the "profound skepticism of both appearances and common sense" (71) in research of this type often produces a *more* valid analysis, Lather proposes a four-part metric to reconceptualize the validity of research outside of traditional paradigms. The two most relevant constructs for gonzo sociology are what Lather terms face validity and construct validity.

Face validity establishes the credibility of data, achieved by bringing preliminary analysis and tentative results to research participants, to ensure their legitimacy and refine them in relation to participant feedback. Construct validity refers to the need for researchers to engage in a "ceaseless confrontation with the experiences of people in their daily lives in order to stymie the tendency to theoretical imposition" (Lather 1986: 67). The goal is to make sure the analysis and results are an accurate depiction of the research participants' world and not a flattening of details to ensure the case fits within existing theoretical constructs. This is achieved through a systematized self-reflexivity in which the researcher is continually using the collected data not only to test theories, but also to test their own assumptions, as well as examining how those assumptions may be shaping both the data and the manner of collecting it (Sefcovic 1995).

The Corrective Power of Gonzo Sociology

Many sociologists enter the field with grand ideas of the research they will conduct and the impact it will have. While it is often necessary to temper these dreams for the sake of financial and time concerns, too often the creativity and passion that brought scholars to the discipline is replaced by fealty to rigid efficiency and "safe" projects that can be completed on an orderly time table (Librett and Perrone 2010; Swauger 2009; Mahoney and Goertz 2006; Westmarland 2001; Kleinman et al. 1997). Gonzo sociology, on the other hand, seeks to act as a counter-balance to these pressures by reopening space for the wild, immersive, and messy research which captures the imagination rather than speaking to narrow debates.

The gonzo method is not intended to be a replacement for traditional sociological research practices, but rather a continuing challenge which interrogates those practices while suggesting new methods of inquiry. Sefcovic (1995) argues gonzo methods could "exist on the edges where academic practice intersects with popular culture" (27), and that the perspective brought by such researchers could lead to more popular styles of both writing and disseminating their research, leading to much greater exposure of their ideas to the general public. Such greater public exposure would be a very positive development for the field of sociology which, despite its many discussions of public sociology (cf Acker 2005; Burawoy 2005), actually has a fairly difficult time getting the public to pay it any attention (Longhoffer et al. 2010).

In the place of replicability and rigid methodology, the value of gonzo research lies in a reflexive science (Burawoy 1998) producing innovative insights gleaned from marginalized populations who can only be studied with constantly-evolving, novel methods (O'Neill 1974). It is to be measured by the breadth of knowledge produced on the subject at hand, producing theories and insights with a face validity, as measured by research participants, and a construct validity that provides rich, detailed information through systematized self-reflexivity (Lather 1986).

The famed journalist Bob Woodward once argued "all good work is done in defiance of management" (Garcia 2012). While academics fortunately do not (yet) face the journalistic pressures of ad sales and immediate turn around times, gonzo researchers will almost undoubtedly face significant hurdles, and the practice may be less open to some depending on the intersections of their identity. Yet this in itself is an argument in favor of more gonzo projects; such an increase would continue to demonstrate both the possibility and viability of gonzo research, likely reducing the institutional resistance to further research in this vein. In addition to opening up greater research possibilities, an increase in gonzo sociology would also bring in significantly more marginalized voices into sociological debates, undoubtedly enriching them (Green and Ward 2009; Vlassenroot 2005; Sefcovic 1995).

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