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Understanding illegality: tests and trust in sociolegal fieldwork

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to discuss the tests the author faced in her sociolegal fieldwork on Hawaiian cockfighting, and to draw broader lessons from these tests for other ethnographers of illegal organizations.

Design/methodology/approach – The author draws on six weeks of in-depth ethnographic fieldwork and interviewing.

Findings – Relational work in ethnographic fieldwork requires skills academia does not always impart – including humility, a sense of humor and patience with yourself and other people. Each test we face is a part of the ongoing process of building these relationships.

Originality/value – As ethnographers, it is sometimes considered "taboo" to tell our stories – to explain our internal and external struggles in the field. This taboo makes a certain amount of sense. After all, we are trying to understand society, not reflect on our own development as people. Yet the taboo is also a pity. For one, it is unrealistic to think that we are "mere observers" whose presence in the field does not affect it. "Scrubbing" ourselves from the field necessarily scrubs out some of our data. It also omits parts of the story that other researchers might find interesting or instructive.

Keywords Methodology, Ethnography, Gender, Law, Crime, Illegality

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In the spring of 2007, I was a newly-trained ethnographer and learned that a family friend was part of an illegal cockfighting ring in Hawaii. The connection was too intriguing to ignore: long conversations led to an exploratory visit, and six months later I set off study a secretive group of illegal cockfighters, unsure I could realistically embed myself well enough to learn anything useful. What incentive would these men have to open up to me? Was I cut out to study something so remote from my own social circles?

It is often considered unseemly for ethnographers to open up about their methodological struggles (Anteby, 2013). A social scientist's task is to understand society, not to introspect. Self-reflection can also make us vulnerable to criticism we would rather avoid. As social scientists, we strive for ruthless honesty, but honesty about ourselves can be embarrassing, because we are people, and most people are imperfect and weird. We tend to be socialized away from self-reflective disclosure via real or imagined scrutiny from peers, the demands of tenure and promotion, or the worry that we will reveal ourselves as unserious, unremarkable, or unscientific. (After all, when is the last time you heard a quantitative researcher remark on how his or her identity influenced a variable's operationalization? (See, e.g. Merry, 2016.))

Yet the taboo is also a pity. For one, our influence on the field and the field's influence on us, are data. Scrubbing ourselves from our accounts limits our analytical capacities. As Diphoorn (2012) writes in her examination of emotions' role in ethnography, "Rather than viewing our experienced emotions as obstructive, we must recognize that they are crucial empirical data and are interrelated to other data that we regard as knowledge" (pp. 202-203;

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see also Rios *et al*., 2017). For another, pretending that ethnographic data can be gathered with the same tidiness that variables can be plucked from the GSS may give other qualitative researchers the impression that the struggles they encounter are a result of poor training or personal inadequacy, when in fact they are simply part of the job.

Test-passing is a particularly important case of these de rigueur, albeit messy, aspects of fieldwork. After all, successful ethnography requires entrance to social groups, and without formal or informal boundaries, a group wouldn't be a "group" at all. But gaining access to an organization with almost no incentive to let you in and almost every incentive to keep you out – something legal institutions and illegal organizations have in common – can be particularly vexing. This article is not an attempt to catalog the tests that all ethnographers of illegal organizations face, but rather to draw connections to other ethnographers' experiences, reconstruct tests I faced in my work on cockfighting, and advance the scholarly conversation about tests' complexities in sociolegal fieldwork.

Gaining entry: trust and toughness

A kind, affable cockfighter of 62, Vincent shared his home with a macaw parrot who lived in the dining room, 5 hens and 25 roosters who lived in the backyard, and his unemployed adult son, Vinnie, who had recently begun occupying the spare room that Vincent had promised to me. I was demoted to the floor in a small space off the kitchen.

At first, Vinnie resented my presence. He inserted himself, sometimes crossly, into my conversations with his father and discouraged Vincent from taking me to the fights' secret location. In my field notes, I reported feeling "test[ed][1]":

> I feel like there's a little bit of a gender thing going on here […] I get the sense that they're testing me out and are still not quite certain I'm tough enough. Vinnie asked me last night if I'd ever seen a real fight and he was […] smirking a little. I replied that I'd seen videos, but in the video, gaffes[sic] were used. He asked me how I liked it and I replied, "Pretty cool." He seemed impressed that I had watched it, [then] told me that the fights with the long knives [the three-inch blades used in Hawaii] are even more brutal […].

This was a threshold test, intended to help them determine whether I could "handle" going to cockfights. Before traveling to Hawaii, I assumed people might not trust an outsider to observe their illegal activities, but I did not realize that toughness was something I would have to continually perform. As others have illustrated, access and trust exist on a spectrum: the social processes that constitute and facilitate access and trust evolve in the field; they are not a litmus test (Marks, 2004; Pope, 2005; Sanders, 2006; Diphoorn, 2012; Wong, 2015).

At my first fight, several of Vincent's friends told me they had never known a "girl" who liked rooster fights, and that a lot of women were "squeamish" and "couldn't stand the sight of blood." I gathered it was paramount that I act comfortable, even when the fights became gory. Flinching, showing disgust or vomiting would mean I was not tough enough. This failure, in turn, would mean that other fighters would see that I did not "get it" and be unlikely to agree to interviews. My field notes depict this test:

> Whether [a fight is over] depends on whether the bird still "has bite […]" If he'll peck even a little bit, the fight is still on […] This was the part that was really disturbing […] you have this bird on the ground, and it's basically dead, but it's using its little bit of life to peck at this other bird, and then the handlers release the birds and it gets the shit kicked out of it […] That part feels cruel and was hard to watch. I steeled myself against it.

> [U]nder the bird's right wing, it had a gigantic, maybe 2-inch gash that was bleeding profusely. Its head was drooping, and there was blood in its feathers […] Vincent said that he'd "sew him up […]" I thought he might put something on it to stop the bleeding, but he did not. He just put [the bird] back into the wooden box, blood and all […] I felt really uncomfortable at the idea of just putting the injured bird back into the box, and I wanted to hold the thing […] to make sure the bleeding

> stopped and to kind of take care of it and give it some water. But this would have been impossible to suggest, and I would lose face and interview possibilities if anyone thought I was an animal rights activist, or even sympathetic.

Although toughness tests are encountered by ethnographers of all genders, women studying mostly- or all-male settings seem practically guaranteed to face them. Marks (2004) describes being " 'tested' by male members [of the police force she studied], who wanted to see whether or not I really had the 'guts' to be in the field with them" (p. 882). Similarly, when Diphoorn (2012) went to the shooting range at her field site, she "felt expected and pressured to act tougher and like 'one of the guys' " (p. 207). This is not to say that male researchers do not face toughness tests as well, but these tests may be of a different character, involving "male patter" or masculinity norms (see Baird, 2018; Crapanzano, 2010).

In a sense, the toughness tests the cockfighters gave me were a simulacrum of tests that they, themselves had faced in their lives. As I depict elsewhere (Young, 2017), Vincent recounted an incident to me from his teenage years when he had begun crying after injuring a wild goat while hunting. His Uncle Charlie, whom he admired, told him, "Cut the damn throat or shoot it in the head." The moment before he shot the creature, tears streaming down his cheeks, Vincent thought, "Do you want to be like Uncle Charlie? If you do, you'll shoot it." He pulled the trigger. Killing the wild goat at close range "hardened" him, he told me. I knew that even if I managed to emerge from the field unhardened, I needed to appear hardened to have a place around the cockfighting pit.

Suspending judgment

People rarely warm to uninvited judgment, and such judgment tends to be particularly unwelcome if people are doing something that they value, but which the law prohibits – perhaps because illegality itself is already a stamp of social disapproval. The cockfighters did not identify as criminals or lawbreakers – nor, by and large, as participants in a mere "sport." Rather, they interpreted cockfighting as way to resist unfavorable social, cultural and economic changes on the island (Young, 2016). Gentrification and increased housing costs created dynamics similar to those Sherman (2018) relates in her ethnographic account of "Paradise Valley," a rural Washington town transformed by amenity-based development and cultural conflicts between newcomers and longtime residents. Cockfights were a symbol of local identity for the men I studied, and participation was tantamount to resisting social, legal, and economic changes such as increased housing costs, fishing and hunting regulations, and the influx of non-local newcomers (Young, 2016). As in Geertz's (1971) iconic description of Balinese cockfighters, Hawaiian cockfighting "builds a symbolic structure in which, over and over again, the reality of [the cockfighters'] inner affiliation can be intelligibly felt" (pp. 10-11).

While doing my early groundwork for the project, I learned that many fighters assumed outsiders found rooster fights disgusting and immoral, especially if those outsiders were white, female, educated, animal lovers, or from the mainland United States. I am all five, which made it crucial not to give fighters the impression that I was judging them. And for this impression to be convincing (because I am hopeless at pretending moral equanimity), it was crucial to honestly reserve judgment and understand cockfighting as best I could from fighters' point of view. This standpoint is consistent with my belief as a social scientist that behavior is shaped largely by structural and experiential factors. Judgment can be anathema to understanding these influences – although it is worth considering, too, the possibility that reserving judgment is a more reliable indicator of moral turpitude than of ethnographic ability. I suspect that certain activities (dog fighting, for example) would trouble me so deeply that I could not make a good faith effort to see the world through the eyes of those who participated. Cockfighting challenged my boundaries in this regard, but did not exceed them. It also helped that I found nearly all of the fighters to be immensely interesting,

engaged, and likeable, which is not a luxury available to all ethnographers of illegal behaviors (Diphoorn, 2012; Hume, 2007; Pickering, 2001).

Sometimes the fighters assumed that my calm demeanor at the fights, my camaraderie with them, or my curiosity about cockfighting meant that I endorsed it. For example, a fighter named Greg thanked me for "stand[ing] up" for the "sport." When these interactions occurred, I could let the fighter believe he was right, positioning myself as an ally, or correct him, which felt more honest. I chose the latter, reiterating that I wanted to understand cockfighting, not defend it. Some fighters said this was "good enough for [them]," because withholding judgment was the closest they had ever heard anyone "like [me]" come to defending the activity. Others pressed me: "But do you think it should be illegal?" Here, I demurred with vague, honest replies like, "Gosh, I'm not even thinking about it like that." The people I interviewed seemed to find this satisfactory. As Diphoorn (2012) writes, "By not judging them or intervening, I had passed a test somehow" (p. 218). Not echoing the law's implicit moral disapproval positioned me, if not as an ally, then at least as someone who was distinct from legal authority and from non-local middle-class social morays.

Identity tests: gender presentation

The hardest times to avoid passing judgment were when fighters expressed racist, sexist, anti-Semitic, or homophobic attitudes (though they did so, I suspect, no more frequently than many other groups in the United States). Aside from the misogyny, which I detail in this section, I never perceived these statements as "tests" purposely directed at me.

As I have elaborated upon elsewhere (Young, 2017), I adjusted my self-presentation in the field to present what Pascoe (2007) calls a "least gendered self." To avoid being an object of sexual desire, Pascoe presented herself as a woman with masculine social capital. She knew about "guy" topics but did not challenge the masculinity of the boys she studied, instead maintaining a "liminal stance" with regard to gender. Similarly, I wore women's jeans and boots, a T-shirt, eye makeup, earrings, contacts instead of glasses and long hair, which I flat-ironed to match the fashion at that time. My goal was to look like a "tomboy" who could "keep up with the guys," but was not masculine or gender deviant, particularly given the anti-gay sentiments some fighters expressed. The challenge of managing gender presentation in the field has been described by other women ethnographers of predominantly male environments. For example, Marks (2004) writes, "Women in the police often have to prove themselves over and over again as competent and intrepid agents, while still maintaining a feminine disposition (Brown, 1997, 2000; Martin, 1996). This is an extremely difficult balancing act" (p. 882).

While my gender presentation seemed to produce my desired level of unremarkability, it was still unusual for a woman to attend cockfights, particularly the exclusive, smaller backyard fights to which I was sometimes invited. Frequently, my reaction to misogynistic comments was tested at these events. I tacitly understood that my invitations to backyard fights would cease if I appeared offended by fighters' remarks about women. To exist in this space, the men seemed to be letting me know, I needed to understand that they would not alter their behavior on my account:

> Today Pat mentioned [at a small fight in his backyard, that a fighter from a different gang] […] had a good-looking wife […] V said he thought so, too. Well-built, Pat said. "But she like one cow now!" V asked, "she's gotten fat?" Pat nodded gravely, and they made some joke about what they were feeding her, [describing] her as a cow. And a few of the guys looked at me to see if I was laughing, and I made sure that I looked amused […] I shook my head a little in a "boys will be boys" kind of way […] This seemed to make them comfortable, and they talked about how there were fat women in Tennessee. V said that they were "corn-fed […]" It seemed very important that I not appear to be offended by this stuff.

I did not express misogyny myself, but I tolerated misogynistic behavior during my research (both at the fights and in fighters' homes, including the home where I was living) to demonstrate that I was not oversensitive. If my reactions matched fighters' fears about women's inclusion in their conversations, my access would have been limited. Even though I was deeply uncomfortable remaining silent, I needed to convey that the men could relax around me without self-censoring. I discovered that being the "right" kind of woman built trust and facilitated access. As Wong (2015) experienced in her study of tiger skin suppliers and traders, men would not only talk to me readily about their illegal activities because they found me unthreatening, but about their home and family lives (p. 699; see also Marks, 2004, p. 881). Thus, my gender offered advantages; "being a female researcher who studies male dominated groups occupied with illicit or illegal acts is not [simply] a liability to overcome" (Bucerius, 2013, p. 717; see also Young, 2017).

Other identity tests

A related test had to do with my social class. It spread that I attended Stanford University, which in the working-class context of the cockfights carried stereotypes associated with wealth, privilege and snobbishness. I was tested to see whether these stereotypes applied – whether, despite my affiliation with Vincent and my working-class attire, I was secretly "slumming" like the "trust fund kids" (as the fighters called them) who would visit Hawaii for a year or two and work part-time retail for "kicks" before returning to the mainland and working in finance or starting graduate school.

Pat, who ran the large weekly fights and was highly respected by the other fighters, asked me about my background multiple times. I was honest, and made sure to mention the low-wage jobs in my work history. Pat seemed pleased. My field notes provide detail:

> Pat was definitely trying to feel me out. He asked where I went to school and I told him Stanford and he looked at me and after a while he said, "Hmm. Must be expensive." I could tell he was trying to figure out if I'm some rich city [person]. I told him [that in a PhD program] they paid for me in exchange for [helping] teach classes, and he said that sounded like a pretty good deal. I said it was a great deal, and that I'm lucky. He said I must be really smart if I go to Stanford, and […] I basically shrugged it off. He asked if rent was expensive in Palo Alto, and I told him it was terrible […] He asked how I survive and I said, you know, you just cut corners and it's a little tight sometimes. He respected this and nodded and said, you make it happen somehow. And I said, absolutely. And this seemed to kind of bond us […] He was totally feeling me out for class stuff, making sure that I wasn't just slumming […] He seemed to approve. Before we left, he told me he had a [cock]fighting magazine I could read, and that he would bring it Wednesday when he and V fought the short knives, and I said that that sounded great and that I would read whatever he gave me.

Once, my second week, I nearly "failed" a social class test from Vincent, due to my (admittedly upper-middle-class) coffee preferences:

> After the fights, we […] were going to meet Vinnie [at a bar]. On the way there, I told Vincent I could use a cup of coffee and he offered to stop at Wendy's. I can't stand fast-food coffee and I [asked] Vincent […] could we go somewhere [better]. I could tell right away that this was a big mistake. He looked shocked and said, "Oh, really?" and I realized I had to backpedal […] I started laughing and said, "Did I get you?" like I had been joking. He said, "Oh!" and started laughing. He said he thought I thought I really was too good for Wendy's coffee. I was extremely relieved […] We laughed some more about my "joke" and I said, let's just have coffee at the bar. We got to the bar [and I] ordered coffee, which I dumped three things of cream into and it didn't change the color at all. It was putrid, but of course I wasn't going to send it back now. So Vincent tasted it and said something like, oh my God! How can you drink this? This coffee is horrible! Which, of course, it was. He got the waitress, who said she'd make a fresh pot […] [It had] sat overnight and was re-warmed. So then I made fun of V about being a secret coffee snob, and we laughed about this, and it […] became a recurring joke that he was snobby about his coffee.

I also capitalized on aspects of my identity that made me an insider in the cockfighters' world, particularly when I wanted to distance myself from the stereotypes they held about educated white women. For example, I am partly of Portuguese descent, and there is a stereotype in Hawaii that Portuguese people are unintelligent. So when a fighter said something like, "Man, you must be smart to be at Stanford," I would say something like, "Yeah, but only for a Portagee," which made them laugh. Due to their history as laborers in Hawaii, Portuguese–Americans are considered a local ethnic group, like Filipino–Americans or Japanese–Americans, as opposed to a subset of whites, who are seen as "Haoles" or outsiders. Vincent was also of Portuguese descent, which sometimes allowed me to bond with his friends by invoking local stereotypes:

> At one point, V came in and he couldn't find his coffee cup. This was very amusing to both [Dennis and me], as V frequently misplaces his coffee cup. Dennis [who was Filipino] said he was going to attach a bungee cord to Vincent's cup if he lost it again. We laughed and I asked Dennis if he could tell that V was a Portagee, and Dennis said, "I wasn't going to go there!" and cracked up.

These kinds of jokes diffused tension around our disparate backgrounds and knit my identity in with the fighters'. It underscored that according to their local understanding, I am not quite white, not quite a Haole (Geschwender *et al.*, 1988). Reflecting on these interactions makes me cringe a bit. At the time, I minimized the harmfulness of my remarks since they targeted a group to which I, myself, belong; they referred to a "white" racial group, which seemed less invidious given patterns of racism in the larger USA; in local Hawaiian culture, unlike the mainland, it is common for people to make jokes in multiracial company that invoke stereotypes about one's own racial background. Just as Baird (2018) "drew on [his] 'maleness' to build bonds in search for a common ground" (pp. 354-355), I drew on my heritage. Perhaps doing so only made explicit the kinds of implicit stereotypes – racial, gender and otherwise – that have long aided other researchers in securing trust and access (Stuart, 2016; Rios, 2011; Baird, 2018; Wong, 2015). Or perhaps invoking any stereotype crossed an ethical line. I am still not certain.

Belonging and spatial norms

Learning the social norms of the weekly cockfights presented a series of small, informal tests that I came to think of as "spatial hazing." The fights are crowded, sometimes with 200 people or more, and those who fail to enact norms properly are shouldered away from the cockfighting pit. They get glares, jabs, and crummy seats. If I wanted a place around the pit, I had to act like an insider. I suspect that the illegality of the activity made it even more important that I demonstrated comfort and familiarity with the milieu's conventions.

Until I got to know fighters who could vouch for me or save me a seat, spatial hazing challenged the legitimacy of my presence in this culturally important illegal space, although it took me a while to figure out which parts were actually tests. My early notes about attending the cockfights are peppered with complaints about all varieties of minor rudenesses: men glaring at me, stepping directly in front of me, blowing cigarette smoke into my face or expelling mucus near my shoe. I took care not to show annoyance, nor to retreat from the men who did these things. Early on, I thought some of the men were just boorish; later, when these little offenses slowed, then stopped, I realized what had been going on. Eventually I understood the space well enough to assert my place in it, as my notes detail:

> Rhett had brought a silver bench that he put out when he got there early for his people to sit on during his matches. During other matches, when [Rhett's gang wasn't] there, other people sat on it. When I wanted to sit on it, I pretty much did. I felt like I was "with" Rhett's crew enough to do this, and on two occasions, I said, "Excuse me," firmly to a guy who was sitting there, and indicated that I was going to sit on the bench, and so he needed to move. This was the first time I had done this,

> and no one challenged me. If there was room for others, I let them sit on the bench, but it only had room for 2-3 other people, so on both occasions I had to boot a guy. I felt fine doing this – it was "my" seat. At one point, a young guy […] said, "You can sit there," when he came over, as if it was his bench and he was giving me permission. I knew we didn't know this guy, and I said a little rudely, "Yeah, I know" to indicate that this was my place to sit.

As I became more familiar with the cockfights' sociospatial dimensions, I learned the most appropriate ways to meet fighters from other gangs. I knew not to approach anyone if a fight was about to start. I knew to introduce myself by saying, "I go with Rhett." I also came to understand which behaviors were socially disrespectful and demanded pushback (taking someone's seat) vs those that were best ignored (smoke in the face, spitting near someone's shoe). When I saw a fighter I had met before, I knew that as a woman, I should greet him with a hand slap or half-hug, plus a kiss on the cheek, not with a handshake (which would have been appropriate if I were a man). Once I became a regular presence, the men no longer stared every time I approached the pit, and occasionally even defended my "place" if it was taken by another spectator ("Hey brah, that lady would like her chair back"). By the time I left the field, my presence no longer raised much interest. Indeed, I exchanged curious glances with some of them if we noticed an outsider at the fights. Here, as in the rest of this paper, I use the terms "insider" and "outsider" advisedly; I am mindful of Narayan's (1993) critique of the paradigm. Rather than viewing these labels as fixed categories, I understand them as situational, contingent, and malleable.

Entering the group: vouching and belonging

While my affiliation with Vincent gained me initial access, I needed to capitalize on the fighters' networks to expand my connections. Certain fighters were social gatekeepers. Getting access to someone in Gang A was easier if I had already interviewed someone else in Gang A. And someone who was lower-status in Gang A was unlikely to refer me to someone with higher status. For this reason, it was helpful to meet high-status fighters. Relationships with respected members of a group can be instrumental in getting access to others (Wiebel, 1990, pp. 8-9), so I was keen to forge a friendship with Pat, who ran the large weekly fights. Although I did not "go with Pat" – meaning that I did not attend fights with Pat's gang or sit in their "camp," – I was invited to some of Pat's backyard fights, and eventually he granted me an interview. Pat did not recommend other fighters to interview, but he gave me permission to tell others that I had interviewed him. Pat's willingness to vouch for me was invaluable. Once others learned that he trusted me, I gained access to more interviewees.

Knowing Pat also enhanced my social status and subjective sense of belonging, as my field notes show:

> At one point watching the fights and watching the crowd, I was standing on a chair I had snagged and put behind the chairs where people were sitting and where people were standing. And Pat saw me and waved, and I waved back, and […] there was like this little bit of pleasure that the most respected, prestigious guy there had acknowledged me in front of all these other people.

Forming these kinds of relationships is not without complication. In a sense, Pat's acknowledgment made me feel complicit in the cockfight. Other ethnographers of illegal behavior, studying topics from illegal deforestation to Brazilian street gangs, have walked similar lines, questioning the point at which their acquaintance with informants crosses the line into tacit endorsement of the activity they are studying (van Solinge, 2014; Baird, 2018). Nonetheless, being vouched for by key community members was a crucial step to gaining access, as it has been for other ethnographers of illegal behavior (van Solinge, 2014; Baird, 2018; Stuart, 2016).

In addition to developing relationships with important fighters, I engendered trust by promising not to interview police officers. Originally, I had intended to talk to law

enforcement officers from the vice unit who patrolled the fights (see Young, 2014). But in the field, it became clear that I would have greater access to fighters if I did not endeavor to speak with, as they put it, "both sides." In his study of the policing of anti-fracking protests, Jackson (2019) adopts a critical criminological perspective, detailing the advantages of not approaching law enforcement officers and instead concentrating his energies on the subjects of policing. He views this strategy as a means of gaining "access to those groups who, due to their negative perceptions and/or experiences of policing, are reluctant to engage with research." Similarly, I found that letting the fighters know I wanted to learn from their perspectives, not simply be a voyeur to lawbreaking behavior, effected trust (see Van Solinge, 2014).

Although I was an outsider to cockfighting culture in the ways I have detailed here and elsewhere, I built upon ways I was an insider as well (see Young, 2014, 2016, 2017). I shared food with the fighters, which was an important aspect of socialization. My mother was raised in Hawaii, and when I was growing up, she sometimes gave my brother and I local Hawaiian foods like salted plums and dried cuttlefish as special treats. I highlighted this cultural commonality by bringing snacks to the fights and sharing with the fighters, which surprised and delighted them ("You eat this stuff?" they would ask). I would sometimes bring small gifts of food to fighters' houses, and if they offered me anything to eat, I graciously accepted it; as in many other cultures, rejecting someone's food can be interpreted as rejecting their welcome. I also improved my understanding of Hawaiian Pidgin, and spent as much time as possible with fighters and their families in many different contexts. These efforts resulted in a mixed insider–outsider status that offered benefits, including the ability to build cultural and linguistic rapport (Wong, 2015, p. 699; Baird, 2018, p. 346), to ask difficult questions (Bucerius, 2013) and to normalize data collection in a way that accustomed respondents to my presence (Pope, 2005, p. 1182).

The most reliable means of gaining trust was to make my curiosity apparent. I suspect that most people want to be seen, known, and understood, and I suspect this is even truer when something they care a great deal about is judged harshly by the outside world. As surprising as I found it that a 60-something cockfighter let me sleep on his floor and feed his chickens, I think it was equally surprising to him that a (then-)20 something woman from the mainland was so interested in cockfighting. As Wong (2015) relates about interviewing men who supplied illegal tiger skins, "The interviewees may have interpreted my interest in their illicit activities as a 'flattering aura of specialness' (Harrington, 2003, pp. 609-610)" (p. 699). To illustrate this interpretation, Wong (2015) describes an instance "when a tiger skin supplier introduced me to his friend and he said excitedly about me 'she came all the way from Hong Kong to speak to me'" (p. 699). Similarly, I once overheard Vincent on the phone telling his brother about my interest in cockfighting and reciting some of the questions I had asked. The surprise and enjoyment in Vincent's voice were palpable. For him, I had passed the most important test: he knew that I not only sought to understand something he cared about, but that I sought to understand it on his terms, not my own.

Illegal activity and ethical lines

A week into my fieldwork, Vincent asked if I wanted to spar the birds. The idea both intrigued and sickened me. I declined. Ethically, it was gray. On one hand, the risk of physical harm to the birds was nil. In sparring matches, roosters are outfitted with little rubber "boxing gloves" that sit snugly over their natural spurs (or over the sawed-off stubs where their natural spurs used to be), preventing them from inflicting damage. Two roosters encountering each other in the forest are more likely to wound each other than two sparring roosters are. On the other hand, though, it almost felt like a real fight, partly because the fighters treated it so seriously, and partly because it was done to train roosters to get better at hurting each other.

Discussing his ethnography of Columbian gangs, Baird (2018) points out the dangers of "over rapport" – the "readiness" of those studying illegal behavior "to empathize in an effort to understand" the people they are studying, and to "drift" into problematic behavior as a consequence of their positionality within communities where practices or discourses of violence or illegality are modal (p. 353, citing De Laine, 2000). An entry I wrote when I was approximately halfway through my fieldwork and had attended several sparring sessions in fighters' backyards, illustrates how this drift can happen in a search for rapport:

> This evening after we went on a trip to the sporting goods store to get one of his fishing reels fixed […] I asked Vincent if he'd show me how to spar the birds […] He said he would. I said, "Really?" and he said, "Sure, it's not that hard." He seemed really happy I had asked. He acted like it was not a big deal, but I got the sense that it was. On the way into the supermarket right afterward, I mentioned that I like strawberries, but that they're so expensive. And he put his hand on my shoulder, which he had not done up to that point, aside from a hug hello or something. And he gave me a kind of half-hug and said, "I'll buy you strawberries." I said, "You got me?" and he said, "Yep, yep." I took this as a sign of camaraderie attributable […] to my request that he teach me to handle the birds.

Shortly thereafter, my field notes describe my sparring experience:

> We went outside and V and Vinnie were sparring the birds […] They do about 4 rounds and spar them in the order of the least good birds to the best […] They sparred [three pairs of birds]. After [that], Vincent wordlessly handed me the bird he was holding, and went to get the [birds'] medicine […] Vincent told me to hold it so that its breast was exposed, and so I turned it over, and he nodded. He put the shot into the breast […] Then he pointed to a cage and said I could put him back in there […] Then they took two more birds out of the cages. Vincent put the boxing glove on the bird. He said, "You want to do it?" and I said, "Sure," and took the bird […].
>
> Right before he asked me, I was looking at the birds and thinking how [troubled I am by this]. But when V asked me, I said "yes" instantly, because I didn't know if he'd ask me again […] he handed me the bird, and told me not to hold it too tight. Its breast was taut in my hand, and it was very soft. Vinnie had the other bird […] Then they said 1, 2, 3, and at each count, Vinnie and I held the birds out toward each other, but not so much that they would be able to bite each other […] After 3, and drawing them back, we each took a step back and set the birds down. They flew at each other, and I was surprised at how I felt; I was interested in who would do better, and I wanted the bird I was holding to […] "win"[even though the birds couldn't hurt each other, and even though] a few minutes earlier, I had been thinking how bad and cruel it was to do this at all […].

Baird (2018) writes that "When the researcher crosses an ethical line in pursuit of the data they covet, they have made a moral trade-off, and their willful presence arguably legitimizes discourses of violence in the field no matter how critical the posterior writeup may be" (p. 353). I may not have crossed a legal line, but in sparring the birds, I felt acutely the "moral trade-off" Baird describes. I did not spar again. At the same time, participation in a mock match aided my research, both by demonstrating my interest – legitimizing my presence to Vincent and especially to Vinnie – and by allowing me to understand the fighters' emotional engagement with cockfighting by experiencing a version of it myself.

Legal lines aside, how morally distinct is my experience from Goffman's (2014) decision to accompany one of her informants to seek revenge for the death of a friend (Lubet, 2015)? Or from Marks's (2004) search of a suspect when she was studying South African police? Or from Winlow *et al.*'s (2001) decision to place ethical considerations "secondary to the pragmatics of getting a job as a bouncer and keeping it?" (p. 542). I do not have an answer. Academic norms and formal IRB agreements tend not to map perfectly onto the complex, split-second decisions ethnographers make in the field. As Baird (2018) points out, our very presence can be interpreted as a form of social legitimization. Which is not to argue that moral lines are irrelevant – far from it – but rather to suggest that the tests we face as ethnographers do not always have obvious right answers. This underscores the importance

of reflexivity, of questioning our decisions, and of being forthright about our mistakes, regrets, and close ethical calls. The backlash against Goffman's work in Philadelphia worries me – not because I think she made the right choices or because ethnographers should not be second-guessed, but because some of the critique she faced was so ungenerous and unforgiving that I fear it will nudge other ethnographers toward keeping mistakes, self-doubts, and reflexivity out of their formal accounts.

A question of time

My limited time in the field made complete immersion necessary. If I could have stayed on the island for a year, it might have been possible to dip in and out of the cockfighting world, observing a few fights and conducting a few interviews every week. But practical concerns made this unfeasible; I lived on the island less than two months.

Since then, I have wondered about the utility of short-term ethnographies. What can we learn in such a compressed time? Short timelines hold clear disadvantages. Forging relationships with research subjects takes time, particularly in illicit settings (Sanders, 2006). I felt closely connected to many fighters by the time I left, but my data would have been richer if I had stayed longer and observed them in more contexts. Similarly, delimited time in the field delimits the conclusions we can draw from our data. I could not observe how fighters' relationships developed over time, how cockfighting practices changed throughout the course of the season, how rivalries and alliances between gangs played out in the long term, or how fighters' attitudes and ideas evolved. Additionally, as I have detailed, I engaged in a fair amount of impression management (Goffman, 1959). With more time in the field, I might have earned enough trust to feel like I could share more of myself without compromising access. I missed out on observing longer-term dialectical processes that could have proven analytically valuable.

At the same time, a short ethnography is not just a pale imitation of a longer one. A great number of observational hours can fit into a compressed time, and some social patterns emerge quickly. I have heard people recommend "at least six months in the field," or, "at least a year." These prescriptions seem too wooden. In the six weeks I spent with the cockfighters, I was fully immersed. If each day constitutes 16 waking hours, we could conservatively estimate 12 hours a day on fieldwork: 84 hours per week, or 504 hours total, of participant observation. Many ethnographers observe a classroom or workplace for eight hours a week for 12 months and describe it as "a year of fieldwork." Which, although technically true, totals nearly 100 fewer hours than a completely immersive 6 weeks. My point is not that one approach is superior, but rather that when we think about time in the field, we should consider the amount of observational opportunity, not just beginning-to-end length. Our primary question should be whether the methodology is appropriate and feasible for the project, and whether our theoretical and empirical claims can be supported by the data we gather.

If a years-long ethnography is a marathon, a one- or two-month ethnography is a sprint. Hitting the ground running requires extensive advance work. This can include exploratory trips, phone conversations or pilot interviews with potential connections, studying and memorizing maps of the area, and reading in as much depth as possible about anything that could prove relevant. It can take weeks or months to get acclimated to a new field site, and a short-term project affords no adjustment period. Nor, in my experience, is it realistic to expect that one's life during short-term fieldwork will consist of anything besides spending time with subjects, writing field notes, or sleeping. The truncated time frame prevented the toll on my physical and mental health that a longer study of similar intensity might have exacted (see, e.g. Diphoorn, 2012, p. 214). Even so, I found departure from the site challenging, and a recovery period was crucial in readjusting to my home life.

Failed tests

Betting on a friend's bird is a way to support a friend within Hawaiian cockfighting culture. Individuals who "go with" a certain person (as I "went with" Rhett), and sit with his gang at the large weekly fights are expected to "pinto" the fighter. This means they contribute to the fighter's minimum bet for each rooster he fights at the event. If the fighter loses, the money is lost; if he wins, he returns the money plus between 80 and 100 percent. Indeed, the "pintoing" expectation is so strong that it extends to children, who might only offer a dollar or two. At one point, Rhett's partner, Josie, scolded their daughter because she had squandered her money on video games, leaving her empty-handed when it was time to "pinto Daddy."

Since pintoing is a form of gambling, and since all gambling is illegal in Hawaii, betting on the fights was strictly forbidden by my hard-won IRB approval. Additionally, wagering on the life of an animal would have violated my own moral commitments. Per IRB, I could be present at a cockfight, but could not facilitate it or participate in it. For example, tying a knife onto a bird's foot or collecting wagers would have violated my agreement.

My commitment to IRB raised problems as I became more closely associated with Rhett's gang. My refusal to pinto Rhett seemed strange to my subjects at first, then became awkward, and finally, as I became more socially integrated, was seen as stubborn and rude.

I was introduced to the importance of betting at my first visit to the large weekly fight. At that point, I had not come up with an excuse not to bet. Nor did I want to explain the IRB prohibition yet, since people were still becoming accustomed to the idea of having a researcher at the fights. In my field notes, I relate this first encounter with betting:

> [W]hen Rhett had fought his third fight and decided to go home and patch up the bird that was a draw, Rhett's sister asked if I had bet anything, and I said I was not much of a gambler. They nodded politely, but I could tell that I had somehow offended them […].

As I spent more time with Rhett's gang in other contexts, I explained that the university prohibited me from gambling. While the cockfighters tolerated this, they still seemed to find it insulting. It became a small wedge that separated us, and caused some uncomfortable moments in the field:

> Before the fight, when Tom was holding the bird and Rhett was putting the knife on, everyone was talking about how much they'd go in – V went 300, Vinnie wasn't there – he was still fishing – but had gone 100, Tom went 1,000, etc. Rhett asked me how much I was in for, and I said I couldn't – that I wasn't allowed to bet […] (Last night, Vinnie tried to convince me to give him $100 and let him bet for me, and no one would know, and I said no, which he did not seem to understand, since no one would find out, but after one or two more tries, he did not pressure me further.) Especially since I had made it known that I liked and admired the bird when it sparred, Rhett seemed to understand […] but still seemed a little disappointed by it. Not betting definitely set me apart as not a member of the group. This was a big division […] everyone put in besides me (even the kids), and that this was like a vote of confidence in Rhett himself […] betting on the guy in your gang, or your group that you go with, is very much a statement that we're all in it together, we're all supporting you.

Eventually, I found a way to talk about my refusal to gamble that made the situation less awkward. I discussed it as something I regretted, telling Rhett that I was only allowed to bet "fake dollars." When everyone handed him money, I would tell him how many fake dollars I was in for. The implication was that if I were not prohibited from doing so, I would be pintoing Rhett. I felt ethically conflicted about implying this (see Winlow *et al.*, 2001).

As they got to know me better and grew comfortable joking with me, the fighters would tease me about how I "wouldn't stop writing" or that "all I did [was] write." Using humor to openly address my constant failure of this test seemed the best I could do. As I recount:

> After the fight, people went back to the camp in excellent spirits […] Rhett said that this fight was going to be "the talk of the day." He was really proud of it. He took the knife off while Tom held the bird, and he shot the bird with something. I asked what he was shooting the bird with, and he said,

> "Antibiotics." Then he said, "Now you can write that down in your notes." I grinned and said, "I probably will." And Vincent, in a deep, mock-academic voice, said, "administered for wounds incurred." Vincent and Rhett and Tom and I laughed […] Rhett also told me I had won 200 fake dollars, and I said that I was going to pretend to buy Vincent dinner with it. [We all] laughed at this.

Betting would have been a way to become closer to the fighters, and I suspect that if I had bet, I would have earned more trust. Indeed, if I were to do it over again, I would submit an IRB revision request to allow me to pinto fighters (which, I am guessing, would be denied). Failing this test set me apart from the group and created distance between me and the people I wanted to understand. The inability to pass a test is tremendously frustrating as an ethnographer, particularly when you know that passing it would allow you greater access. Still, if you cannot pass a test, you must find the best way to fail it.

Conclusion

Crapanzano (2010) observes that "A test is a way one's informant learns something about you" (p. 67). As we learn about the people we research, they learn about us. They decide which confidences to share and which stories to relate. They assess how much we can be trusted and what we are capable of doing and understanding. Much of the challenge in studying illegal organizations lies in the tension between passing tests in the field and embodying a version of whatever you think of as your genuine self.

For me, the only effective balm for this tension was the close relationships I formed with cockfighters and their families. As ethnographers, we know that interactions are the foundation of social structure, but establishing authentic relationships with people whose beliefs or commitments are different from yours requires skills academia does not always impart – including humility, a sense of humor, and patience with yourself and other people.

Ethnography is a dialogue – a dialectical process through which, to various degrees, we know and become known. Though the precise contours of "reflexivity" are contested (Diphoorn, 2012, p. 203), one promising approach incorporates DuBois's notion of double consciousness, striving to "consistently interrogate and correct the ways in which our own research processes and writings may contribute to the exploitation, caricaturization, oversimplification, and denigration of the populations we study" (Rios *et al.*, 2017, p. 495; DuBois, 1903). Enacting this approach while studying illegality can be particularly challenging. The law itself has pre-"othered" our subjects, separating you, the law-abiding researcher, from them, the law-violating members of an illegal organization. We can actively de-"other" our informants by genuinely seeking to know them – to learn *from* them, not merely about them. Each test we face is part of the ongoing process of building these relationships.

Note

1. Throughout this paper, I will share excerpts from my field notes. These excerpts are italicized.

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