ON QUESTIONING THE QUESTIONNAIRE:
Research Experiences[1]

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Social scientists generally present the conclusions of their studies without describing how their ideas may have changed in the course of doing research. They also rarely discuss the impact they have on the persons they study or the ethical problems of research. I will address both of these issues, focusing on my experiences doing research on Mexican urban poor. In addition, I will describe how and why my conceptual framework changed during the study and raise some general questions about the relationship between theory and methods and the types of moral dilemmas faced by researchers, who often are neither value-free nor politically neutral.

Initially, the study was premised on the assumption that poor people differ from other socioeconomic strata in their level of institutional participation and knowledge of national and international affairs. Although concerned with community and national institutional arrangements, I viewed poverty at the outset primarily from an individualistic perspective: the main focus was upon the attitudinal and behavioral integration of "marginal" people into the dominant, national society, given a belief that once "integrated" they would cease to be poor. It was also assumed that as long as they were poor they would be deprived, frustrated, and alienated, and that they would use the electoral apparatus to articulate their dissatisfaction.

These notions proved to be empirically incorrect. The fieldwork revealed that the "fate" of urban poor is primarily shaped by forces rooted in the national political economy; that the persistence of Mexican poverty derives mainly from the way the society is structured, not from poor people's failure to participate actively in national institutions. Only by abandoning this initial conceptualization, which assumed that conditions associated with poverty were determined by people's social, economic, and political predispositions, and by substituting a framework that took the country's semidependent capitalist economy and corporatist policy into account, was it possible to understand correctly why so many migrants and city-born people are poor, and why they do not use the electoral franchise and the political party apparatus to pressure for more social and economic benefits. The manner in which my analysis was modified is outlined below.

STAGE 1. ORIGINAL HYPOTHESES AND DESIGN OF STUDY: PARTICIPATION AND DWEL-
LING ENVIRONMENT AS IMPORTANT DETERMINANTS OF POVERTY AND THE POLITICS
OF POVERTY

I began with three central hypotheses: (1) exposure to metropolitan life and the
mass media, education, and employment in the "modern" sector of the economy
would incline people to be politically informed and involved,[2] as purportedly
was the case in the countries which industrialized first; (2) dwelling environ-
ments have a decisive impact on residents; that is, different types of sub-urban
communities facilitate or hinder the "integration" of residents into local and
national life, and affect the extent to which residents are content with city
living,[3] and (3) people would articulate politically their satisfaction or dissatis-
faction with their social and economic situation. In conjunction with the second
hypothesis, it was assumed that the intensity and extensity of neighboring
would vary from one type of community to another, and that individuals' feel-
ings of political alienation and political radicalism would vary accordingly. In
line with Kornhauser's thesis,[4] I thought that informal "integration" would
prevent anomie and alienation and that it would predispose people to support
the status quo.

The first hypothesis implied that as the social, economic, and cultural
background of Mexicans became more "modern," Mexican politics would in-
creasingly come to resemble Anglo-American politics. It also implied that so-
called social, cultural, economic, and political participation are interrelated phe-
nomena. The second hypothesis implied that different housing environments
offer different opportunities and experiences to residents. Both the second and
the third hypotheses implied that people use the franchise to express their
frustration and sense of deprivation.

To test them, a study was designed to compare individuals in diverse low-
income dwelling environments on the basis of quantifiable data obtained from
formal interviews. The research locales included an old center-city slum with a
large proportion of people who lived most, if not all, of their life in Mexico City;
a newer area (one formed initially by squatters) with a large proportion of
migrants; and a low-cost housing project with a large proportion of residents
who lived most, if not all, of their life in the capital. Residents in the three areas
were expected to differ in the extent to which they (1) participated in modern
social, economic, and political activities; (2) had close network ties with neigh-
bors and were integrated into the local communities; and (3) were aware of the
national political and governmental affairs and satisfied with the status quo.
Based on urban sociology and "modernization" readings, differences among the
three areas were imagined to be as follows:

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Community	Participation in Modern Activities	Close Network	National Awareness	Political Orientation
Squatter Settlement	−	+	−	Indifferent
Housing Project	+	−	+	Alienated
Center-City Area	+	+	+	Positive

(+) and (−) are used relatively.

There was reason to expect not only aggregate differences *among* the three areas but also differences *within* each area. There also was reason to believe that people with similar backgrounds would hold divergent views, depending on the community in which they lived, if indeed their community of residence served as an important frame of reference. I thought, for example, that in an area with extensive neighboring (e.g., in the center-city area), socially isolated individuals would feel more lonely and discontent than people with equally few social contacts living in an area where neighbors tended not to intermingle (e.g., in the housing development), and that their different social-psychological states of mind would affect their respective political orientations: accordingly, isolated persons in the former setting would be most apt to support movements and political parties challenging the status quo. It was also expected that people of equal wealth would differ in their satisfaction with the status quo depending on how well-off their neighbors were. These hypotheses were deduced from reference group theory and from the logic of contextual analysis.[5]

STAGE 2. ADDITIONAL HYPOTHESES AND EXPANSION OF RESEARCH DESIGN: THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY ELITES

Initially, the study focused not only on the residents of the three areas but also on community elites. Through interviews with local elites I sought to learn about (1) community power structure; (2) attributes distinguishing elites from ''common'' residents; (3) patterns of interaction among local elites, and between them and other persons within and outside the communities; and (4) the history of local groups and settlements. At the time I did not understand how to link systematically such community-level data with the individual-level data obtained from the interviews with residents, or how sub-urban communities, and institutions located within them, were structured in a society such as Mexico. While recognizing a similarity between the Mexican political system and authoritarian regimes, I simultaneously assumed that the local elites could potentially function autonomously of national elites, as is implied in most of the literature on ''community power'' in the United States.[6]

The local versus national origin and orientation of the elites seemed to be the most crucial dimension for understanding them, the groups they headed,

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and the communities in general. It was conjectured that in comparison with nationally oriented elites, locally oriented elites would be less prestigeful and powerful, less change-oriented, more cliquish, more aware of community problems, and more particularistic in the way they conducted their groups and related to their constituencies. Furthermore, it was assumed that the more elites were locally oriented, the less integrated local groups and residents would be into urban and national society. Nevertheless, the possibility of an elite-mass "gap" was recognized, and it was anticipated that the "width" of the gap would have significant social consequences. For instance, it seemed that the more locally oriented the elites were, the more informed and concerned they would be about local problems, and the more likely they would be to have interests similar to those of residents. Consequently, the more locally oriented community elites were, the less alienated and anti-status quo residents were expected to be.

STAGE 3. FIELDWORK

After arriving in Mexico and selecting the three areas for my study, persons in elite positions and "common" citizens were informally interviewed and the formal questionnaire that had been designed to test the three basic hypotheses of the study was pretested. The original fieldwork led to (1) shortening the questionnaire; (2) eliminating several of the questions that revealed respondents' ignorance, because residents resented having to reveal constantly their lack of knowledge; and (3) rephrasing certain questions that appeared to be worded ethnocentrically. In addition, the procedure for selecting a sample of elites and the purpose of the elite interviews were modified, largely because the communities were structured differently than had been imagined initially.

I discovered that none of the methods conventionally used for deciphering the power structure of American communities helped to delineate an identifiable group of locally powerful elites. Many persons occupying top positions within local institutions tended to be ill-informed about the local communities (though more informed than "ordinary" residents), minimally involved in the local communities, and restricted in the activities they initiated. They served mainly as intermediaries between local residents and functionaries associated with citywide and national institutions, and oriented their activities toward higher-ranking functionaries outside the areas. To consider them members of a local "power structure" therefore seemed ill-founded. Consequently, I was reluctant to use the "positional" approach often used for sampling community elite.[7]

Nor did the "reputational" technique delineate a group of local individuals who were perceived as having power, wealth, or prestige;[8] many of the people interviewed could name few, if any, such elite. In addition, the institutional elite who were most knowledgeable, priests, were not formally vested with the greatest power, and they were not perceived by other elites or residents to be the most important persons within the local communities. Because the regime is so publicly committed to anticlericism, the populace seems to perceive civic and religious affairs as very distinct. Were priests powerful or influential

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within the local communities, de facto if not de jure, the "reputational" tech-nique, which relies on people's reported perceptions of the power structure, did not make this self-evident. Most people felt that the government alone was influential, but the national rather than the local government.

On the basis of conversations and field observations it appeared that there was no clearly *perceived* local power structure and that there was no clearly *defined* local power structure. Since authoritative decisions were not made lo-cally, I decided also against the "decision-making" approach, sometimes used in "community power" studies.[9] Realizing that there was no autonomous local power structure, I abandoned the idea of doing a systematic, quantifiable analy-sis of community leadership based on a sample of local leaders. Instead, local leaders, conveyed through "positional" and "reputational" techniques, were used only as informants about present and former community-based groups and about the history of the areas. Through them a great deal was learned about the organizational texture of the communities including the disjunction between the formal and actual structure of inter- and intra-organizational relations.

Upon recognizing how little formal institutional autonomy the communi-ties, the groups within the communities, and the heads of groups had, it also became apparent that nonlocal forces had a great impact on residents. At this point I finally concluded that the "life chances" of persons in low-income areas were largely determined by structural forces external to the communities. This shift in theoretical orientation also stemmed from the following observations:

1. despite marked differences in the physical and social environment of each of the areas, most residents supported the official party;

2. residents tended to support the party independently of whether they thought the regime was responsive to their interests, independently of whether they felt their personal situation had improved over the years, and independently of whether they had a rich network of friends and relatives;

3. residents over the years became increasingly less involved in terri-torially-based politics, but their involvement in local and nonlocal occupational groups did not simultaneously decline; and

4. the economic status of residents *within* each area varied about as much as it did from one area to the next, and that therefore the type of community in which people lived had little bearing on residents' socioeconomic "fate."

In sum, these observations revealed that in Mexico, the conditions that give rise to urban poverty and the forces shaping the politics of urban poor can only be understood within the context of *national* processes and institutions. Urban "communities" and their leaders and residents must be studied within this broader framework; they can not be comprehended from a perspective in which individual attributes are the basic unit of analysis. My present under-standing of causes and consequences of urban poverty could never have been attained merely by perfecting sources of information within an "individualistic" framework. Much of my time was consequently devoted to understanding "macro" political and economic forces and the way they impinged on the sub-urban "communities" and the persons residing in them.

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RESEARCH DILEMMAS

As a foreigner, I stood outside the local status hierarchy. The generally accepted standards of who talks to whom and what one talks about applied less to me than to Mexicans, and I was excused if I did not conform to the norms that customarily regulate local interpersonal relationships. As a consequence, I could investigate matters that would be sensitive ground for an "insider." People often felt safe talking to me; I could act interested and ignorant and ask questions that a "middle-class" Mexican could less readily ask. The poor people interviewed would assume either that their "middle-class" compatriots were more knowledgeable than they or that revealed information might be used against them. Furthermore, I am afraid that most of the people in the three areas I studied were flattered that I, an American, took an interest in them and their problems.

My nationality also created difficulties, particularly in interviews with nationalistic, "middle-class" functionaries who held ambivalent views toward America and Americans. Defensive about Mexico, they at times told me what they thought would impress me, not what they honestly believed. They were particularly inclined to present a good image of Mexico in view of the widely publicized work of Oscar Lewis,[10] which Mexicans considered to be highly critical of their country. A few of them were particularly hostile toward and suspicious of my formal questionnaire. Fortunately, such antagonism was minimized by administering the questionnaire to elites only at the end of my stay in Mexico, when I had established rapport with them.

My gender facilitated my fieldwork, as people generally viewed the political intent of women less suspiciously than men, in line with prevailing sex stereotypes. Furthermore, the people I met seemed to find me compassionate and concerned. Attracted by my fair skin and—by Mexican standards—light-colored hair, Mexican men, prompted by *machismo*, took pleasure in explaining things to me and in showing me around. Yet, because I was a single female, I never felt entirely relaxed. As a foreigner, at times I could violate accepted female mores without being suspect sexually by men. At a few fiestas, for example, I talked with the men who sat separately from the women; I could not have done this easily had I been a Mexican female. Nonetheless, while the sexual mores operating among the Mexican poor did not ipso facto apply to me, I was reluctant to take advantage of the prerogative. Occasionally men suggested seeing me at work or in the evening, with the intention of turning the meeting into a social rather than a "professional" occasion. Since they rarely made their intent explicit, I often found myself in a bind: while I wanted very much to interview them, I did not want them to feel that I was interested in a personal relationship. One awkward experience involved a doctor who invited me to dinner at his home, but asked me to meet him at his office. Since he was not at work at the designated time I went to his house, thinking that he had gone home early. When I arrived there I realized that his wife had not expected me. I subsequently learned that while he planned to dine with me, he intended to take me out, alone, to a restaurant.

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While most U.S. scholars who address themselves to the ethicality of U.S.-sponsored investigations concern themselves with issues of funding, disclosure of findings, and researcher involvement in the domestic affairs of foreign countries,[11] researchers may face other moral and political issues. Fieldwork often involves investigators in situations that are socially and politically consequential, even when they are unaware that this is so. My research involved me in the following dilemmas, not all of which I realized at the time.

First, all parties are not equally able to make use of my findings, despite the fact that the study is unclassified and accessible to anyone. Persons in positions of power are best able, given their resources, to utilize the data; they could, if they so chose, use the data to better control poor people. I became particularly aware of this when some functionaries of the Institutionalized Revolutionary Party (PRI) said that they would collaborate with me. They wanted to learn about people in the areas because PRI's electoral strength in the district had diminished in recent years. I never returned to meet with these functionaries, and to the extent that my findings are used to enhance the PRI's support among these or other Mexican poor, or used to the disadvantage of the poor, they are used for purposes other than I intend or want.

Second, my fieldwork involved me in power relations that helped my research. In retrospect, I feel that I gained access to the private worlds of the people studied partly because I was assumed to have an outside base of power linked to my nationality. Many Mexicans of low socioeconomic status emulate Americans, largely because of their wealth. Still others probably cooperated with my study because they felt that, as an American, I might help find them jobs in the U.S., serve as their sponsor so that they could live and work in the U.S. legally, or assist them financially. One semiliterate Pentecostal minister, for instance, believed the stereotype that Jews are wealthy; upon learning that I was Jewish he asked me to help him get money for a "temple" he wanted to build. He even wrote me after I left Mexico, requesting financial assistance. Another minister also wrote asking me to help him relocate in this country. Rightly or not, I did not sponsor emigrés and I provided no economic assistance to people in the three areas.

Furthermore, as an extension of the power relations, my status as an American inadvertently caused me to confer status on the people I interviewed by talking with them, and on local groups by "noticing" them.[12] Local leaders occasionally used me as an excuse to initiate contact with higher-ranking functionaries. Others insisted that I sit with the officers at group meetings and that we exchange words in English in front of their "followers." Too self-conscious at the time to realize the social and political implications of my presence on such occasions, I now recognize that my association with these politicians and our brief public dialogues in English enhanced their prestige and, in some cases, possibly also their political prospects.[13]

Moreover, since *políticos* within the area view prestige and influence as a "limited good," I sometimes had difficulty maintaining contact with more than one group within each community without exacerbating local political tensions. I became regarded as a political asset whom local elites felt they could not

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equally share. Occasionally local elites were offended and jealous of my ties with their political rivals. Although I never disclosed information obtained from one leader to another, even when asked, I felt morally compelled to reveal, upon inquiry, the names of people I contacted. Perhaps dishonestly, I tried to be discreet about my contacts. To avoid accounting for all my interviews and becoming enmeshed in local political conflicts, at times I parked my car at some distance from the home or office of the person with whom I had an appointment.

Somewhat independently of the power relationship, my very presence as a researcher occasionally was politically consequential, even when I did not want or intend it to be. For example, one of my "key informants" sent a communiqué to a man who headed a local group because she thought that I would be interested in observing his reaction and that I would reveal his reaction to her. When the head of the group read her letter at one of his meetings he used the opportunity to make fun of her in front of his followers and challenge her credibility as a local leader. Although I never discussed what transpired at the meeting with her, the incident does reveal the way in which fieldwork indirectly involves researchers in political and ethical dilemmas.

Finally, my research, unfortunately, was directly and indirectly exploitative, as is most fieldwork. Persons collaborating with me received little in exchange for their assistance or time. Since I interviewed some people who did piecework or were self-employed, the time I spent with them raised economic as well as moral issues. Moreover, I would have preferred not to help those políticos who benefited from my prestige; while I liked the functionaries personally, I disliked the way their work helped extend and reinforce the legitimacy of the highly inegalitarian Mexican regime. Had I become deliberately involved in local affairs I would have resolved the ethical dilemma of reciprocity; but, as a foreigner, I would in the process have involved myself in the internal affairs of a foreign country, which would have raised still another issue.

Social scientists must take into account not only intellectual and feasibility considerations when planning their research, but also the tacit ethical and political issues raised by their work, because they engage in activities that are often politically consequential, even when they believe that they are politically detached. In general, the ethical issues related to research must be more openly recognized. I do not feel that, in all instances, I satisfactorily resolved the dilemmas I faced; but in making the issues explicit, perhaps I can help minimize the likelihood that other scholars may be unethical or manipulative.

NOTES

1. For the results of the research, see Susan Eckstein, *The Poverty of Revolution: The State and Urban Poor in Mexico* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977).
2. This hypothesis was based on the work of Karl Deutsch, "Social Mobilization and Political Development," in *Political Development and Social Change*, edited by Jason Finkle and Richard Gable (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1966); and Daniel Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1958).
3. I derived this assumption from ethnographic accounts of ethnic "villagers" and slum

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dwellers in Mexico and in other countries. See Herbert Gans, *The Urban Villagers* (New York: The Free Press, 1962); William F. Whyte, *Street Corner Society* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1969); and Oscar Lewis, *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty* (New York: Basic Books, 1959) and *The Children of Sanchez: An Autobiography of a Mexican Family* (New York: Random House, 1961).

4. William Kornhauser, *The Politics of Mass Society* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1959).
5. Robert Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1961), pp. 225–386.
6. Such local autonomy is implicit both in the pluralist and in the elitist models of community power structure. See, for example, Robert Dahl, "A Critique of Ruling Elite Model," *American Political Science Review* 52 (June 1958): 463–69; Raymond Wolfinger, "Reputation and Reality in the Study of Community Power," in *The Structure of Community Power*, edited by Michael Aiken and Paul Mott (New York: Random House, 1970); Floyd Hunter, *Community Power Structure* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1953); and Nelson Polsby, *Community Power and Political Theory* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1963). The few American social scientists, such as C. W. Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956) and G. William Domhoff, *Who Rules America?* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1967), who emphasize the centralization of power in the United States, concentrate on national, not local politics.
7. On the "positional" approach see Robert Schulze and Leonard Blumberg, "The Determination of Local Power Elites," in *The Structure of Community Power*, edited by Aiken and Mott, and Dahl, *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1961).
8. See, for example, Hunter, *Community Power Structure*.
9. See Polsby, *Community Power and Political Theory*.
10. Lewis, *The Children of Sanchez*.
11. The concern with researchers' direct involvement in the domestic affairs of foreign countries usually centers on whether the meliorative attempts are kept within limits acceptable to the established government of the country concerned, *not* whether the involvement is in the best interests of the people studied. For a statement of this status-quo ethicality, see Robert Ward, "Common Problems in Field Research," in *Studying Politics Abroad: Field Research in the Developing Areas*, edited by Ward (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown, 1964).
12. Similarly, Joseph Gusfield, in "Fieldwork Reciprocities in Studying a Social Movement," *Human Organization* 14 (Fall 1955): 29, describes how his association with the Women's Christian Temperance Union, which he studied, conferred a definite status on the group; and David Colfax, in "Pressure toward Distortion and Involvement in Studying a Civil Rights Organization," *Human Organization* 25 (Summer 1966): 140–49, notes that a civil rights group that he studied found his research "status conferring."
13. To the extent that I had such effects I was not a neutral observer, even though I considered myself to be. While engaging in "participant observation" fieldwork I was an "outsider." In Gans' words I was never a "real" participant. See Gans, *Urban Villagers*, pp. 339.