

Case 7: Robbers, Rogues, or Revolutionaries: Handling Armed Intimidation

Daniel Peters was beginning his fourth month of fieldwork in an isolated Central American community. His research on family health care practices required the close cooperation of several households, and friendly relations had been painstakingly developed.

One morning shortly after dawn, as he was preparing for another day of work, Daniel learned that five armed men in civilian attire had been seen near town asking about foreigners and referring to him by his first name. Hastening to the plaza, he found that the municipal authorities had not yet arrived. Before he could consider what to do next, he realized that the five strangers were heading up the road into town. From the heavy arms they shouldered in plastic sacks and from the way they spread themselves out upon reaching the plaza, he knew they were not ordinary thieves.

The next few minutes pressed Daniel's role management skills to the limit. Two of the men greeted him and claimed to be there to help a foreigner by his name who had suffered a misfortune in a nearby town. After proceeding to inquire about his finances (minimal), his transportation (no vehicle), and his visits to other communities (infrequent), they admitted to not having a surname to go on and left as suddenly as they had appeared. Some boys reported that they later left the area in a government vehicle. By nightfall, many rumors were circulating and inquiries by municipal authorities to state officials remained unanswered.

Peters's Dilemma: (1) Suspecting an affiliation more serious than the robbers that most people believed the strangers to be, should he disclose his belief to others? (2) Should he attempt to find out why he had been sought out? (3) Should he attempt to dissuade frightened individuals from withdrawing from his study? (4) Should he take any action to prevent rumored, and potentially real, recrimination against his cooperating families? (5) Finally, should he terminate his research?