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20 Fieldwork

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Introduction

Despite fieldwork's importance in political science research, many PhD programs do not offer adequate training. This leaves graduate students on their own to locate guides and work by trial and error. Consequently, first-time field research is daunting for many. In this chapter, we define the object and purpose of fieldwork and offer practical advice on a range of topics, including planning fieldwork, sampling, networking, interacting with research participants, carrying out interviews, *physical safety* and mental well-being in the field, and research ethics. This guide is based on our experiences in a variety of settings and on different topics, and is based on the original article, "Field Research: A Graduate Student's Guide" (Irgil et al. 2021).

Fieldwork-related concerns arise from an unfortunate shortage in curricular offerings and instructional materials for qualitative and mixed-method research in political science graduate programs (Emmons and Moravcsik 2020). As a result, many early-career researchers are underprepared for the logistics of fieldwork, from developing networks and effective sampling strategies to building respondents' trust and moving about *the field* safely and ethically.

To remedy this, the five of us share a set of suggestions based on our own extensive field research. Our experiences differ in several respects, from the time we spent in the field (ranging from 10 days to several months), to the amount of time we had to prepare, to the locations we visited, to how we conducted our research. We have worked in countries where we have professional proficiency in the language, and in countries where we have relied on interpreters. We have worked in settings with precarious security as well as in locations that feel as comfortable as home.

In this chapter, we first define what fieldwork is and its application through different *data collection* methods. Then, we detail the purpose of fieldwork, followed by *funding* applications in the context of fieldwork. We then move on to the phase of entering the field and adapting to the field. Moreover, we address physical safety and mental well-being both during and after fieldwork, and we conclude.

What is Fieldwork?

Despite its prevalence in political science, fieldwork as a concept is not well-defined. Even symposia discussing the "nuts and bolts" of conducting research in the field within the pages of political science

journals rarely define it (Hsueh et al. 2014). In this chapter, we define fieldwork as acquiring information using any set of appropriate data collection techniques for qualitative, quantitative, or experimental analysis through embedded research whose location and duration depends on the project (Irgil et al. 2021, 6).

First, despite often being placed squarely in the domain of qualitative research, fieldwork can also serve quantitative projects—for example, by providing crucial context, supporting triangulation, illustrating causal mechanisms or through quantification of data that are available only in the field (Jensenius 2014). For instance, Willis's research on the United States military in East Asia began with quantitative data collection and analysis of protest events before turning to fieldwork to understand why protests occurred in some instances but not others.

Second, while much fieldwork requires leaving the country in which one's institution is based, this is not a requirement. What matters is the nature of the research project, not the locale. For instance, some of us have interviewed representatives of intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) and international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), whose headquarters are often located in the Global North countries in which we reside. The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the relevance of remote fieldwork.[1]

Third, the appropriate amount of time in the field should be assessed on a project-by-project basis, depending on the research question, the data to be collected, available resources, and prior familiarity with the field site. Our own presence in the field has ranged from a few days (Kreft at the United Nations in New York) to a few weeks (Zvobgo's interviews with human rights NGOs in different research sites), to several months (Willis's research on discourse around U.S. military presence in overseas host communities).

Purpose of Fieldwork

Fieldwork allows researchers to use different techniques to collect and access original/primary data sources. These include, non-exhaustively: visits to archives to review (or quantify) historical documents, interviews to obtain in-depth information or better understand human behavior, surveys to understand opinion formation, or lab-in-the-field experiments to better understand decision-making.

But beyond data collection as such, fieldwork is also useful for *theory-building* and *theory-testing* (Geddes 2003). When studying the rise of a protest movement in South Korea for her dissertation, for example, Lee found that existing theories did not offer a convincing explanation for the movement. Based on interviews she conducted with movement participants, she developed an alternative theory that centralized the authoritarian past as a unifying and mobilizing factor in the protest participants' collective identity.

In terms of theory-testing, many political scientists turn their attention to conducting field experiments or lab-in-the-field experiments to reveal causality (Finseraas and Kotsadam 2017), or to leverage in-depth insights gained through qualitative or archival research in process-tracing (Ricks and Liu 2018). Of course, for most PhD students, some of these options are financially prohibitive.

Funding

For many fieldwork projects, procuring funding via grants or fellowships is a necessity, regardless of how long one plans to be in the field. (Readers interested in a more general discussion of research funding should see chapter 23 in this volume.) A few things are important to keep in mind when applying for funding for fieldwork. First, the time between applying for and receiving funds, if successful, can be quite long, from several months to a year. For example, after defending her prospectus in May 2019, Willis began applying to funding sources for her dissertation, all of which had deadlines between June and September. She received notifications between November and January; however, funds from her successful applications were not available until March and April, almost a year later.[2] Accordingly, we recommend applying for funding as early as possible; this not only increases one's chances of hitting the ground running in the field, but the application process can also help clarify the goals and parameters

of one's research.

Second, while both large and small pots of funding are worth applying for, many researchers end up funding their fieldwork through several small grants or fellowships. For example, Willis's fieldwork in the Philippines, Japan, and South Korea was supported through fellowships within each country. Similarly, Irgil was able to conduct her fieldwork abroad through two different and relatively smaller grants by applying to them each year. The amount of funding needed, of course, depends on the nature of one's project and how long one intends to be in the field; for some projects, even a couple of weeks in the field is sufficient to get the needed information.

Preparing to Enter "the Field"

What kind of preparations do researchers need? To maximize time in the field, good planning is important but requires a longer time horizon. By the time one contacts potential research participants, the data collection instrument (e.g., survey, interview questionnaire, experimental design, etc.), the informed consent protocols, and whatever ethical approval is required should already be in place. This gives you a much clearer idea of the universe of individuals you would like to involve as research participants, how you intend to (ethically) do so, and for what purpose. A general piece of advice is to research your target population's preferred communication channels and mediums (e.g., phone, various messenger services) in the field site if email requests yield few responses.

Regarding ethics and review panels, we encourage readers to talk openly, honestly, and as early as possible with supervisors and/or funders about situations where a written consent form may not be suitable and might need to be replaced with "verbal consent." For instance, doing fieldwork in politically unstable contexts, highly scrutinized environments, or vulnerable communities might create obstacles for the interviewees as well as the researcher. The literature discusses the tension between preserving the interviewees' anonymity and confidentiality while also requesting signed written consent (Saunders et al. 2015). Therefore, in those situations, the researcher might need to take the initiative on how to act while doing the interviews as rigorously as possible.

Ethical considerations also affect the research design itself, with ramifications for fieldwork. For example, when Kreft began researching women's civil society mobilization in response to conflict-related sexual violence, she initially aimed to interview victims of this violence to examine variation among those who did and did not mobilize. As a result of deeper engagement with the literature on re-traumatization, conversations with colleagues, and critical self-reflection of her status as a researcher (with no background in psychology or social work), she decided to change focus and shift toward representatives of civil society organizations. This constituted a major reconfiguration of her research design and strategy, from one geared toward identifying the factors that drive the mobilization of victims to one that identified how women mobilized in civil society "make sense" of conflict-related sexual violence.

Finally, when one wishes to conduct research in a country where one has less than professional fluency in the language, pre-fieldwork planning should include hiring a translator or research assistant, for example, through an online hiring platform like Upwork, or a local university. More generally, establishing contact with a local university can be beneficial, either in the form of a visiting researcher arrangement, which grants access to research groups and facilities like libraries, or by informally contacting individual researchers. The latter may have valuable insights into the local context, contacts to potential research participants, and may be able to recommend translators or research assistants.

Adapting to the Reality of the Field

Flexibility is key. Despite careful planning, there may be obstacles that necessitate adjustments to one's original plans. While it is important to have a list of people to contact in the field prior to entry, some leads will not be as fruitful as anticipated and you will likely add contacts to your list via snowball sampling (e.g., meeting new contacts through other contacts). You may meet people you did not make appointments with, come across opportunities you did not expect, or stumble upon new ideas about collecting data in the field. These happenings are part of the process; they will enrich your field experi-

ence and your research. Similarly, researchers should not be discouraged by interviews that do not go according to plan; this is normal and may even present opportunities to pursue relevant people who can provide an alternative path to your work.

Zvobgo, for example, had fewer than a dozen interviews scheduled when she traveled to Guatemala to study civil society activism and transitional justice since internal armed conflict. But she was able to recruit additional participants in-country. Interviewees with whom she built a rapport connected her to other NGOs, government offices, and the United Nations country office, sometimes even making the calls and scheduling interviews for her. Through snowball sampling, she was able to triple the number of participants. Likewise, snowball sampling was central to Kreft's recruitment of interview partners. Several of her interviewees connected her to highly relevant individuals she would never have been able to identify, and contact based on web searches alone.

We note that conducting interviews is very taxing. Depending on the project, each interview length might differ. Hence, field researchers should make a reasonable schedule and plan sufficient time for each interview, including travel and time for reflection/writing of field notes. This helps one to avoid cutting off an interviewee, missing important information, or being too exhausted to have a robust engagement with a respondent who is generously lending you their time.

We would also like to highlight the importance of distinguishing things that can only be done in person at a particular site from things that can be accomplished later at home. Prioritize the former over the latter. Lee's fieldwork experience serves as a good example. She studied a conservative protest movement in South Korea. She planned to conduct interviews with the rally participants to examine their motivations for participating. But as she only had one month in South Korea, she prioritized things that could only be done in the field: she went to the rally sites, she observed how protests proceeded, and she met participants and had some casual conversations with them. Then, she used the contacts she made while attending the rallies to create a social network to solicit interviews from ordinary protesters, her target population. In a nutshell, it is sometimes most beneficial to use one's time in the field to build relationships and networks as it can be more difficult to do so from outside the field.

Interacting with people in the field is one of the most rewarding yet ethically challenging parts of the work that we do, especially in comparison to the impersonal wrangling and analysis of quantitative data. Field researchers often make personal connections with their interviewees. Consequently, maintaining boundaries can be a bit tricky. Here, we recommend being honest with research participants without overstating the researcher's abilities. This appears as a challenge in the field, particularly when you empathize with people and when they share profound parts of their lives with you in addition to being "human subjects" (Fujii 2012). For instance, Zvobgo was very upfront with her interviewees about her role as a researcher: she recognized that she is not on the frontlines of the fight for human rights and transitional justice like they are. All she could/can do is use her platform to amplify their stories, bringing attention to their vital work through her future peer-reviewed publications. Interviewees were very receptive. In some cases, this prompted them to share even more, because they knew that the researcher was there to listen and learn. This is something that all scholars should always remember: we enter the field to be taught.

As researchers, we recognize a possible power differential between us and our research subjects, and certainly an imbalance in power between the countries where we have been trained and some of the countries where we do field research, particularly in politically dynamic contexts (Knott 2019). Therefore, we argue, researchers should be concerned with being open and transparent with everyone with whom they come into contact in the field and committed to giving back to those who so generously lend us their time and knowledge.

Physical Safety

Researchers may carry out fieldwork in a country that is less safe than what they are used to, a setting affected by conflict violence or high crime rates, for instance. Insecurity is also often gendered, differentially affecting women, and raising the specter of unwanted sexual advances, street *harassment*, or even sexual assault (Gifford and Hall-Clifford 2008; Mügge 2013). In a recent survey of political science

graduate students in the United States, about half of those who had done fieldwork internationally reported having encountered safety issues in the field, (54 percent female, 47 percent male), and only 21 percent agreed that their PhD programs had prepared them to carry out their fieldwork safely (Schwartz and Cronin-Furman 2020, 8–9). Preventative measures scholars may adopt in an unsafe context may involve, at their most fundamental, adjustments to everyday routines and habits, and restricting one's movements temporally and spatially.

Others have collected a range of safety precautions that field researchers in fragile settings may take before and during fieldwork (Hilhorst et al. 2016). Focusing on the specific situations of graduate students, we recommend establishing communications protocols with supervisors or others at one's home institution, granting a colleague or two emergency reading access to one's digital calendar, and putting in place an emergency plan, that is, choosing emergency contacts back home and "in the field," knowing whom to contact if something happens, and knowing how to get to the nearest hospital or clinic. Registering with your country's embassy in the field site and any crisis monitoring and prevention systems it has is also advisable. Finally, it is prudent to heed the safety recommendations and travel advisories provided by state authorities and embassies to determine when and where it is safe to travel. Above all, one should always be aware of one's surroundings, use common sense, and listen to locals. If something feels unsafe, chances are it is.

Mental Well-being

Different sources of stress during fieldwork, such as concern about insecurity, linguistic barriers, or social isolation and loneliness, can be both mentally and physically exhausting. In addition, it is natural for field research on sensitive issues to affect the researcher's mental well-being, especially in the absence of their normal support network (Hummel and El Kurd 2020; Williamson et al. 2020). Emotional reactions may appear disproportionate or unwarranted at a specific moment, but they may simply have been building up over a long time. Our primary piece of advice is therefore to be patient and generous with yourself: accept your emotional reactions as legitimate. Second, remember to take breaks, embrace distractions and rest. Third, we cannot stress enough the importance of investing in social relations, prior to, during and after your fieldwork trip. Seeking the company of locals and of other field researchers alleviates anxiety and makes fieldwork more enjoyable. For more comprehensive discussions and advice see Williamson et al. (2020) or Hummel and El Kurd (2020).

Conclusion

Many of the substantive, methodological and practical challenges that arise during fieldwork can be anticipated. Nonetheless, there is no such thing as being perfectly prepared for the field. Some things will simply be beyond one's control, and newcomers to field research should be prepared for things to not go as planned. New questions will arise, interview participants may cancel appointments, and findings may not match with expectations. So, one should be ready to adjust research and data collection plans, interview guides, questionnaires etc.

Our discussion on fieldwork preparation is by no means exhaustive. Formal fieldwork preparation should extend beyond what we have covered in this article, such as issues of data security, funding, and preparing for non-qualitative fieldwork methods. We also note that field research is one area that has yet to be comprehensively addressed in conversations on diversity and equity in the political science discipline and the broader academic profession.

Endnotes

1 See Howlett (2021) for a more in-depth discussion.

2 In our experience, this is not only the general cycle for graduate students in North America, but also in Europe and likely elsewhere.

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