SYMPOSIUM

Field Research in Developing Countries: Hitting the Road Running

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The availability of relatively reliable and comparable data online and the increasing emphasis on statistical and formal research methods has led many political scientists to dismiss research in foreign countries as a waste of time and money. We leave that debate to others (see, e.g., Comparative Politics Organized Section 2005; Qualitative Methods Organized Section 2004). Instead, we offer suggestions for maximizing the contributions of fieldwork to the production of original research. We pay particular attention to research in developing countries owing to the unique challenges of undertaking research there, but we believe our insights are applicable to field research more generally.

This article is based on a workshop we designed to provide practical advice for graduate students and to steer them toward existing resources on the topic. We cover the identification of short- and long-term goals, the necessary steps to prepare for a productive field visit, the scheduling and conduct of personal interviews, the challenges of focus groups and participant observation, the obligation and opportunity to facilitate access to your research results in your field site, as well as practical and security considerations. Throughout the piece, we are attuned to how multiple and often conflicting sources of identity can inhibit or in some cases enhance the overall experience of fieldwork in foreign countries. We specifically address power relations in interviews, focus groups, and follow-up communication with interviewees.

THE GOALS OF FIELD RESEARCH

Field research should fulfill both short- and long-term goals. Never forget that the immediate objective is to accomplish an explicit task, such as a paper, a dissertation prospectus, or a grant application. Arrive in your research site with a detailed plan for investigating a research question(s) and/or for testing a set of hypotheses. Identify at the outset what types of information you will need and where you will find it. Whereas this will constitute your must-have shopping list, you may also prepare a list of ancillary materials that you can keep a lookout for in case you come across them or have time to pursue them after your immediate needs are satisfied. Arriving with a detailed plan will reduce the danger of running out of time before you collect the most important data; it will also enable you to track your progress, and keep you focused on your goals. Follow the supermarket rule: don't put anything in your cart that is not on your list (Lieberman 2004, 4–5).[1]

At the same time, developing a larger set of contacts is an important long-term goal. It not only enhances you as a scholar, it changes you as a person through exposure to people of differing identities and life experiences. Try to meet prominent social scientists from your field site and obtain their feedback, which often will come from a different empirical and theoretical perspective than your own. Strive to establish your credibility as a scholar of that country and develop contacts that will be useful in the future. Establishing contacts includes meeting graduate students and other academics whose field research overlaps with your own. This will make the experience more personally and professionally rewarding.

Fieldwork is enormously useful for classroom teaching as you bring to your students a window into the world of people and cultures they may have little or no exposure to. It provides a large stock of anecdotes to spice up lectures and to illustrate abstract theoretical concepts. Stories of real people working on the streets in Bangladesh and Argentina help illustrate the plight of informal sector laborers, while tales of interaction with corrupt officials illustrate the difficulties of political and institutional control. It also is crucial for advising students planning to study or conduct research abroad (Moehler 2005, 16, 18). Thus, we encourage field researchers to attend political rallies, read local newspapers, and accept invitations to observe events as they unfold.

PREPARATION

Make the best use of your time in the field by preparing early. Months before you arrive you should have compiled a list of all the important experts on your topic and your research site. E-mail or telephone experts in the United States on your topic and solicit advice with respect to whom you should interview, where and how to obtain archival resources, and other concerns that you have. Read everything on your topic in your library and available through inter-library loan and the Internet. You may be surprised to find out how much is there already. Interviews will be most productive, and field research will be most cost efficient, if scholars collect and digest as much of this as possible prior to entering the field. Prepare a list for collection in the field of those items referenced in what you have read but unavailable at home (Lieberman 2004, 3–4).

Establish an affiliation with a respectable university or institution in the country in which you will be undertaking research. They need not provide any resources to you but it will be useful to have a place that you can tell people you are from, since

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many may not recognize the name of your university. Scholarly affiliations can help open doors (particularly if you are doing elite interviews [Aberbach and Rockman 2002, 674]), provide a safe haven for research, and build an intellectual community—within both the affiliated institution and the larger scholarly or policy community. Affiliations must be worked out months in advance, so don't procrastinate. Potential funders may require this as a condition of your grant.

Be sure to undertake all the necessary steps to secure approval of your research plan through the institutional review board (IRB) of your university if you will be interviewing people in the field. The IRB process is mandated under United States federal statutes governing ethics in research. The aim is to ensure that your interviews and subsequent use of data do not place in jeopardy any of the people you interact with in the field. Typically, IRB offices require online training to familiarize you with the process, submission of a detailed research plan (including your interview tool or survey questions), and commitment on your part to manage the data in ways that protect the confidentiality of your respondents.[2] Any project that involves data collected from human subjects, including interviews, oral histories, focus groups, and opinion surveys (at the elite or mass level), will require IRB approval before going into the field. Secondary data analysis of these types of data generated by previous studies by other researchers or organizations may require IRB approval as well.

Identify particularly important people or events that you want to be able to interview or observe many months in advance. You may wish to alter your travel schedule if you find out that Senator Crucial will be at Prestigious University the entire time you will be in Awayistan. You may learn that a public debate or meeting on your topic is scheduled for after you had intended to leave the field. Remember that elections in developing countries may be postponed and schedule accordingly.

Arrange to print business cards with your university affiliation before you leave. In many foreign countries all professionals carry a business card and it makes it easier for you to exchange information. It also is useful to bring with you official looking letters of introduction on university letterhead.

INTERVIEWS

Conducting personal interviews is one of the most important aspects of contemporary field research because an increasing amount of information on developing countries is available online or in North American libraries. Arranging interviews may be frustrating and time consuming, particularly when people are late or interviews have to be rescheduled. If possible, hire somebody in your research site to arrange interviews, which has the added value of making you look important (Howard 2004, 8). (Be careful if you are on a state or federal research grant, however, since it may preclude paying foreigners.) Otherwise, prior to your arrival, send e-mails to social scientists and other informational contacts and send more formal letters to politicians or other notables whom you would like to interview. The culture of your research setting may preclude setting interviews up far in advance and you may be asked to wait until after you have arrived, but it is useful to make the initial contact with at least a subset of people you might interview before departing on your trip.

We have found that on a very productive day you might complete four interviews. Take into account traffic patterns in your research site and don't over schedule yourself in order to avoid having to rush from one interview to another or being delayed. Have a backup plan if an interview falls through, such as visiting a library or archive.

Begin with contacts that can provide greater insight about your topic and also point you to other potential interview subjects—a method known as snowball sampling (Goldstein 2002, 671). Talking to people you know or to whom you have a personal referral will help you gather the courage to contact potential interview subjects who you identify through your pre-research (known as cold calling).[3] Also be aware that in doing snowball sampling, being an outsider (vis-à-vis the local culture) may in some cases be to your advantage, because local people may find speaking with you interesting—and a way to demonstrate to others that they have important "outside" research connections. At the same time, arranging interviews for you allows them to demonstrate their influence and connections.

However, avoid the temptation to start with the most important people on your list. Wait until after the middle of your research, when you are more informed about the topic and will be able to ask more nuanced questions that anticipate possible responses. You probably won't have a second chance to interview important people so you want to meet with them when you are most likely to get the most valuable information, and you don't want to waste their valuable time on trivial questions (Howard 2004, 9). If they are particularly important, try to get some information about their schedules shortly after you arrive. Don't wait too long to request an interview—they might be too busy and you will have to leave without it.

Before you arrive, you should have a standard interview protocol ready for your interviews or at least a set of questions—in the language of your interview subject—for each category of interviewee. For example, you may have a set of questions for members of Congress, for social scientists working with indigenous organizations, and for leaders of nongovernmental organizations.[4] Varying the language in each interview tool is important, because people at different social locations within society will have differing levels of education, varying degrees of familiarity with technical terms, and diverse political perspectives or social views. If part of your research involves a survey instrument, pre-test it with members of the community you are studying. Consult with other scholars to make sure there is no bias in your interview sample and add interviews accordingly. Prepare and maintain a spreadsheet log of all interviews indicating the respondent, affiliation, date, and mode of interview.

Scholars disagree about whether you should tape interviews or take notes. Many avoid taping because they find it intrusive (see Howard 2004, 8; Woliver 2002, 678). Indeed, it may cause interview subjects to be less forthcoming. In Mexican *maquiladora* (export manufacturing) zones, for example, some workers are extremely uncomfortable with being taped

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for fear of being blacklisted for supposed union organizing. Hence, some scholars feel they can establish greater trust and rapport by taking notes. Others argue that recording enables the researcher to listen more carefully to the respondent and to maintain eye contact without having to worry about writing down what they are saying. Moreover, once the tapes have been transcribed, you can work from an accurate transcript, which will improve your memory of the event and enable you to insert lively quotations into your publications. You also have evidence available, if necessary, that the person actually said what you reported.

If you decide to tape, always give respondents the option to be recorded or not, and to speak for the record, not for attribution, or completely off the record. Remember that with modern communications even informal presentations of your work—such as conference papers—may be accessible to individuals who know your interview subjects personally. One of the authors learned that her conference panel had been webcast live—after the fact! Take care that you protect the identity of everyone making a critical statement such that no harm will result from your presenting their views. Even if you have permission to quote from an interview, use your judgment to avoid any possible harm to your informants (on these ethical issues, see Woliver 2002, 677; Wood 2007, 139).

Transcribe taped interviews promptly. Hiring a transcriber after you return is expensive and that person may not catch the nuances or understand the context of the conversation sufficiently to provide an accurate account. Transcribing the interviews after you return home requires herculean energy and motivation on your part to relive dozens or hundreds of conversations.[5] For that reason, many scholars never listen to them. One of the authors always transcribes tape-recorded interviews and types field notes every night or at least within 48 hours of the interview. This has many advantages. If something is missing or unintelligible it is much easier to fill in the blanks. Light-weight and affordable transcription machines enable you to advance and reverse the tape with a foot pedal while you type the results. They have the advantage of a speed setting so that recording may be slowed down if it is hard to understand—particularly helpful when working in other languages. Moreover, transcribing in the field—and e-mailing the transcripts to yourself—will protect your valuable information should something happen to the tapes. Keep cassette tapes in a secure location to protect respondents' identities and be sure to follow the human-subjects requirements (i.e., IRB protocols) at your university to ensure that you protect the rights of interview subjects.

Even if you do not record your interviews, there are advantages to typing or rewriting your notes more formally as soon as possible. Your contemporaneous notes may contain shorthand and allusions to larger unwritten details. Transcribing them while the interview is still fresh will prevent fewer details from being lost. In addition, revisiting an interview may reveal issues that remain unresolved, which you can revisit with other interview subjects or in a follow-up visit or telephone conversation with the original subject.

Some scholars prefer focus groups to individual interviews. A focus group is a structured group interview, in which a standard set of questions provides the framework for eliciting information and stimulates group exchange that often is much richer than what an individual interview would allow for. They may be conducted in person or over the phone.

Focus groups are cumbersome to arrange. They multiply the scheduling difficulties encountered with individual interviews, so be prepared to reschedule. Be selective—only use focus groups if you think you can get enough meaningful information from the group to make the logistics worth the hassle. Be a good traffic cop: focus groups can be difficult to manage if you don't have a well-structured questionnaire and an ability to manage conflict or silence. In the grassroots settings where one of the authors conducted focus-group interviews with workers and NGO staff, there were many social hierarchies. Often such hierarchies strongly color the way respondents interact in a group setting (e.g., older, male, and more-educated people pull rank). In both Mexico and Bangladesh, for example, one of us found that women in focus groups were often reluctant to reveal much about the gender dynamics within their own families; only outside of the focus group, when the interviewer was speaking informally one on one with women, would they acknowledge the extent of patriarchy, etc. In Bolivia, senior partisan organizers involved in a focus group would contradict junior activists—during the focus group itself, as they were speaking, telling the researchers to discount such personal vignettes and other statements made by their junior colleagues. Be aware of these dynamics so that you can reflect on bias in the group's responses.

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Participant observation is a technique used by anthropologists and sociologists that involves familiarizing oneself with the norms, practices, and constraints of a particular group through in-depth, often repeated interaction. One of the authors "shadowed" the activities of several NGOs in the U.S.-Mexico border region by attending regular meetings, training sessions, and outreach activities. Broach the idea of participant observation with NGOs that you have been involved with over time; it evolves organically—they have to trust you to let you inside their world. Dress professionally and appropriately for the observation setting. Women researchers must often navigate complex, locally engendered expectations of "appropriate" dress and conduct as well as personal safety. Learn to *listen* and *watch*. Take notes discretely—or if that's inappropriate, write up your observations upon returning to your hotel or apartment. Avoid using a tape recorder during participant observation because it makes people nervous and you lose the flow of an ordinary encounter.

One of the authors met with maquiladora workers in their homes by participating in training visits with labor activists who regularly visited workers. She frequently visited the office of the NGOs that facilitated worker visits for her—and this, in turn, created opportunities for additional worker access. She became familiar with the staff and did considerable participant observation of group practices within the NGOs before going out into the field with their staff members to meet workers. Becoming an insider takes time, effort, tact, and luck; be open to meeting people across class, gender, racial, and political lines.

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GIVING BACK

You will always get more than you give if you do qualitative research with people at the grassroots level because compared with graduate students and academics, they have far fewer material resources, far more demands on their time, and far greater risks in everyday life. Their time is precious and they deserve your respect and appreciation. Follow up interviews with thank you notes. If you build a relationship with particular NGOs, educational institutions, or government agencies, send the results of your findings back to them (Barrett and Cason 1997, 120; Wood 2007, 140). They are participants—not subjects—in your research endeavors.

In developing countries, many of the people interviewed complain that researchers come from Europe and North America, undertake their research, and then never share it with the people to whom it would be most valuable. So send copies of the finished book project to libraries frequented by students and researchers, preferably those accessible to grassroots activists. One of the authors tries to send copies of all of her work—and copies of important work published by others, particularly in Spanish—to the major Latin American libraries and research centers that have helped her over the years. Exchanging information closes the circle of communicative reciprocity that is the hallmark of socially conscious research. It also helps to get your published work before a wider audience.

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Some scholars feel an ethical obligation to send copies of everything they publish to the persons interviewed in the publications (Woliver 2002, 678). This may generate practical difficulties if you publish in a language that your subjects don't speak or you have done hundreds of interviews. If you are getting help from researchers in your field country, offer to give a talk about your topic at their institution toward the end of your visit. It is a gracious gesture, begins to establish your reputation in that country, and may provide excellent feedback that you can incorporate in your revisions.

NGOs may request financial contributions. If you would like to make them later do so, but take care to not make a direct exchange of cash for access to interview subjects. Even small amounts go a long way. You also may offer to help NGOs and grassroots organizations with whom you worked to disseminate their message by putting them in contact with supporters in the United States. One of the authors hosted a wine-and-cheese fundraiser in her apartment for a group when a representative was coming to the United Nations. The event raised some funds and awareness of the organization's mission. Consider carefully how a close association with a particular person or organization from your field site might affect perceptions of you as a researcher, as well as how an association with a foreign scholar might affect them. Be mindful that in many developing countries the research process is highly politicized and your interactions may have unexpected impacts on the field site or on individuals.

In addition, in a more immediate sense while in the field itself, it is useful to bring something to interviews to exchange with the people who are giving you their valuable time. Suggestions include inexpensive trinkets from your university or hometown and copies of your published work in English or the language of the country you are visiting. If you meet someone for coffee or a snack you should offer to pay if you can. If you arrange the interview, you might be expected to do so.

PRACTICAL AND SECURITY CONSIDERATIONS

Be stingy about revealing information about yourself, where you are staying, and what you are doing in the country. Taxi drivers may try to get this information from you—they are trying to make you like them and they also may be trying to find good marks for thieves. Politely tell them you are too tired to have a conversation. Be vague about where you are going—just give them the address. Purchase a good map when you arrive—taxi drivers may not know the city well and assume the client knows where they are going.

On a photocopy of the first page of your passport write important financial and contact information—for example, emergency contacts, numbers to cancel credit cards, embassy phone numbers, and doctors' numbers. Hide a copy in your boot, the false bottom of your knapsack, or your cosmetic case. Give a duplicate to somebody at home.

Do not conspicuously display a wristwatch, PDA, cell phone, laptop, camera, or jewelry. Some people in your field site will make a living collecting these items from distracted visitors and they distinguish you as an easy mark. Take electronic devices out in your hotel room, not in a café or on the street. Put your laptop computer in your suitcase rather than carrying it around in its obvious case, particularly at the airport when you arrive and as you arrive at your hotel. Leave it in your hotel room in a drawer or locked to an immovable object.

Every time you add data to your hard drive, copy it to a transportable drive. E-mail this data to yourself or someone back home who can download it to their hard drive. If your computer is stolen you will at least have the research that you have done. If possible, print out your work, especially interview notes. For more practical advice, see Barrett and Cason (1997).

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If you are in the country on a U.S. government-sponsored ticket you may be able to send boxes home through the embassy post office. If not, consider sending boxes of books and photocopied materials through a reliable U.S. courier service. Don't be stingy, choose the safest method. This probably will be cheaper and safer than paying for extra baggage at the airport and many airlines will not ship boxes. Even better, put research materials in your suitcases and mail your clothes and personal items home. Put the most important materials in your carry-on. Include the cost to transport your research materials home in your research budget.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Many graduate students (and even senior researchers) panic at the thought that their carefully developed hypotheses will be disconfirmed by the time that their sandals get dusty. This is a real possibility but it is nothing to be feared. The purpose of conducting field research is to see whether our assumptions about the world, which are based on received wisdom and knowledge of diverse cases, are truly accurate. If they were, there would be no need to leave home.

The best way to prepare for serendipitous surprises is to keep an open mind and to develop a number of plausible explanations for the phenomenon under study. Even if your most important hypotheses and your research design prove unworkable, with some thought and discussion with local people and your colleagues back home you should be able to retool your research design in the field. But you must know your topic extremely well, be familiar with a variety of theoretical approaches, and be sensitive to incoming information that contradicts your original mindset. Theda Skocpol, who doesn't do overseas field research, advises that fieldwork is an important "source of surprise." As she told an interviewer, "Everybody I know who does field work says they work out their hypotheses and theory, then they go to the field and half of what they had worked out beforehand goes out the window. They realize there are things going on they should have been wondering about but never considered until they went to the field" (Skocpol interviewed in Munck and Snyder 2007b, 691). There are good theoretical reasons to hope your hypotheses and assumptions are off the mark: scientific innovation occurs when *unpredicted* outcomes defy common wisdom and overturn existing paradigms (Lynch 2004, 12; Wood 2007, 125).

Our final words of advice are for faculty advising graduate students planning to enter the field. It is tough to incorporate a class on field research into the graduate curriculum, but it is too important a topic—particularly in comparative politics—to leave to casual conversation and mythology. We found that a workshop of several hours involving faculty with diverse research experiences struck the right balance. We also invited a representative from the Office of Sponsored Research to introduce students to funding opportunities at our university and elsewhere. The workshop engaged our students—and made us nostalgic for our own early days of field research. We hope the suggestions offered in this article spark similar reflection and action on the part of our colleagues—and embolden the next generation of comparativists to make that first foray into the field. ■

NOTES

1. At the same time, if you are offered access to interesting data unavailable in your home country on topics that are not your primary interests, and collecting and transporting them will not take much time, effort, or resources, then we encourage you to obtain them as a foundation for a future project.
2. The full federal statute governing the IRB process is 45 CFR 46, and can be accessed electronically at http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/45cfr46.htm.
3. For cold-calling strategies, see Goldstein (1992, 669).
4. For extensive advice on elite and non-elite interview strategies, see the *PS* symposium "Interview Methods in Political Science" (Leech 2002).
5. On this point, see Juan J. Linz, interviewed in Munck and Snyder (2007a, 188).

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