Politics of the "Field"

Lee Ann Fujii

Field Research in Political Science: Practices and Principles. By Diana Kapiszewski, Lauren Morris MacLean, and Benjamin L. Read. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 455p. $36.99.

"The field" was a mystical place when I was a graduate student studying the Rwandan genocide. I had no idea what it was or what I would do there; I only knew I wanted to go. In 2004, I had my chance. I spent nearly nine months in Rwanda studying rural violence that had occurred during the 1994 genocide.

The days were long, the research arduous. I made fast friends with the handful of other researchers in the country. We came from different disciplines and were pursuing very different kinds of projects, yet we talked methods all the time. Questions about methods nearly always came down to logistics. To do any kind of research in rural Rwanda required working out a host of parameters: obtaining official permissions, finding reliable transportation, hiring assistants and interpreters, managing teams of local researchers, paying expenses and salaries, and obtaining enough cash to cover both. The list was endless and while some issues pertained more to one person's project than others, it mattered little to our discussions. What mattered—to me, at least—was learning about the kinds of challenges each of us faced and what strategies we used to deal with them.

These conversations benefited me in many ways. The camaraderie buoyed my spirits. The stories taught me coping strategies. The detailed accounts of my colleagues' projects exposed me to other ways of doing research. Through these discussions, I felt as if I had a front-row seat in my colleagues' projects. I learned what actually went into conducting household-level surveys, a field experiment, or grounded theory interviews. I gained a huge amount of respect for my colleagues and the rigor, moxie, and endurance they showed in pursuing their projects.

After returning home from the field, I noticed that such "cross"-talk rarely occurred. No longer did I find myself in spaces where colleagues from different subfields and research traditions shared their field experiences with one another. Reading *Field Research in Political Science* by Diana Kapiszewski, Lauren Morris MacLean, and Benjamin L. Read reminded me of the pleasures of talking across intellectual divides and the benefits of thinking about field research in broad, rather than narrow terms.

Overview of Book

The authors' objectives in writing this book are threefold. First, they seek to contribute to the methods literature in the discipline by presenting an empirical study of field researchers from Political Science departments in the United States. Second, they make the case that field research contributes valuable knowledge to our understanding of politics. Third, they provide a set of concrete guidelines that will help to "demystify" fieldwork and enable scholars "to do it better" (p. 7). As to the last objective, many scholars heading to the field for the first time will find the book useful for that reason alone. Much of the book's four hundred pages includes guidance on the basics of fieldwork: finding a place to live, staying organized, developing networks, and managing relationships.

The implicit question that Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read ask is what makes for good field research, both in practice and in principle. They define field research as "leaving one's home institution in order to acquire data, information, or insights that significantly inform one's research" (p. 8). This definition is broader than most and includes those projects that do not usually fit stereotypical notions of what it means to do field research. For example, the definition does not assume that the term of stay in the field is long and immersive. Neither does it assume that the field is a foreign country or locale. "The field" might be a school down the street or an archive in a nearby town. The definition also does not specify that the researcher's main objective is to interact with living human participants. A trek to an archive also counts as field research by

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the authors' definition. What they seek to emphasize is the idea that "the scholar is gathering evidence *in context*" (p. 9, emphasis in original). In other words, field research is as much about *how* the researcher relates to the materials and people she seeks out, as it is a geographic "place" for conducting research. I found the emphasis on context particularly important, since this element of fieldwork is often taken for granted and is rarely mentioned in methods articles or book appendices.

The authors use several methods for answering the core question of what constitutes good field research. They conducted an online survey, which generated 1,142 responses out of 4,962 solicitations (p. 46; Appendix). They supplemented this survey with in-depth interviews with sixty-two scholars. Survey respondents and interviewees came from all ranks and subfields in American Political Science.[1] (I myself was one of the interviewees.) They also reviewed the literature on field research in Political Science, which, they discovered, is quite small compared to the more established literatures in sociology and anthropology. Analyzing these data, they find sufficient variation to conclude that "no single, ideal-typical form of fieldwork dominates the discipline today" (p. 370). At the same time, the authors find that despite variation in all aspects of field research—from field sites to methodological assumptions to intellectual goals—scholars across diverse traditions report similar challenges as well as similar strategies for dealing with those challenges.

One of the contributions of the book is the empirical study the authors conducted. Few books on field research provide an original study of field researchers—who they are and what they do in the field (or report doing). Many of the authors' findings are not surprising. Field researchers from Political Science tend to favor rich countries and large cities (p. 56), that is, major urban centers in Europe, the United States, and Canada. When they do venture beyond the rich and powerful, they tend toward large, developing countries, such as India and China. The percentage of female field researchers has increased over the years, as has the number of scholars of color, though the latter figure remains quite low (p. 48). As to techniques for collecting data, researchers use all types. Most respondents reported using at least five different "data-collection techniques" (pp. 71–72), including interviews (the most commonly cited), surveys, newspaper searches, archival research, focus groups, participant-observation, field experiments, and ethnography. This finding indicates that field researchers are eclectic when it comes to how they gather data in the field.

Other findings were a bit more surprising. While most field researchers come from Comparative Politics, respondents represented every subfield in American Political Science, including Political Theory (p. 49). Over half of those surveyed used their own personal money to fund their projects. The median amount of personal funding was $2,000 (p. 63). Those who came from the wealthiest universities, which the authors define as the top twenty in the United States,[2] were able to obtain greater levels of funding for international projects than those coming from schools outside that tier (pp. 64–65). Over the decades, the time spent in the field has declined. The authors speculate about possible reasons for this decline, including increases in the cost of travel and greater availability of digital data (p. 64).

The most striking findings are the commonalities the authors find across field research and researchers. Based on these findings and their own fieldwork experience, Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read identify six core principles that make for good field research: engagement with context, flexible discipline, triangulation, critical reflection, ethical commitment, and transparency.

Engagement with context refers to the value of simply being in the field site and learning about the environment firsthand. The authors point out that such engagement benefits all scholars, not just those using qualitative methods. Survey research, for example, "often requires forms of immersion in field sites" (p. 297). Flexible discipline concerns the need to remain nimble in order to adapt to field conditions. As scholars learn in the field, they may need to make adjustments to their projects. They should be clear about the reasons for doing so and record those justifications so they can refer to them months later during write-up. Triangulation is the practice of gathering data not only from multiple sources, but also from diverse voices and viewpoints. The purpose of triangulation is to represent empirical reality as "comprehensively" as possible (p. 29). Critical reflection is the researcher's ongoing assessment of how the research is unfolding in terms of research goals, strategies, design, and any modifications the researcher has made along the way. Field research, as the authors point out, is an iterative process; critical reflection helps to steer those iterations in productive ways. Ethical commitment is the researcher's obligation to conduct research that, at a minimum, follows IRB regulations or, maximally, provides direct benefit to participants. Transparency is openly describing and documenting the research process, and all the choices and decisions that went into that process, including the reasoning or justification that the researcher used to make each decision.

In addition to these six principles, the authors give space to topics that are not frequently discussed in the methods appendices of books or articles by political scientists. For example, they devote an entire chapter to what they call "Site Intensive Methods." In this chapter, they discuss topics such as the ethics and challenges of using deceptive methods,[3] the social obligations that arise over long-term immersion in a field site, and the challenges of giving back to communities where scholars have conducted research. Because these issues do not always

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make it to course syllabi in Political Science methods courses, it is refreshing to see them discussed in some detail in their book.

Further Issues to Ponder

The authors also make a concerted effort to be inclusive in terms of methodological approaches to field research. They state at the outset, for example, that they seek to be "ecumenical" on questions of epistemology (p. 13). Notwithstanding their intent to remain agnostic, the default language and orientation of the book is positivist. The authors use the language of "measurement," "bias," "inference," and "validity" throughout, as if those terms had universal meaning across all research traditions. The authors do point out, at times, how an interpretivist scholar might depart from how a positivist-oriented scholar might proceed, but these brief interjections only underscore the taken-for-granted status that positivism has in American Political Science. Simply talking about what constitutes good field research requires adopting some kind of methodological stance, and the dominant approach in the discipline, particularly in the United States, is positivist. Readers who are interested in texts that start from interpretivist assumptions toward field research should avail themselves of other key works in Political Science, such as the edited volumes by Dvora Yanow, Peregrine Schwartz-Shea, and Edward Schatz, and monographs by Joe Soss, Frederic Schaffer, and Timothy Pachirat.[4]

In their conclusion, the authors state their book is meant to be the first step in a larger discussion about what constitutes good field research, not the last word. In the spirit of continuing the conversation, I identify three areas for further discussion: the uniqueness of political science field research, an examination of field research as privileged action, and a call for more reflexivity on the part of all who go to the field.

How Unique is Political Science Field Research?

How different is the field research conducted by political scientists from that of sociologists, anthropologists, geographers, and other scholars who study politics? The authors argue that the literatures on field research that come from outside Political Science are of limited value to political scientists because they do not address issues specific to the discipline. To what extent is that true? In my experience, graduate students learn to be *too* disciplined too quickly. Their reading rarely strays outside Political Science. This has resulted in a lack of literacy in cognate disciplines and a diminished ability to understand other approaches to studying politics on their own terms.

As the authors' own findings indicate, intellectual boundaries become less relevant when it comes to actually doing fieldwork. I would argue the same is true when it comes to disciplinary boundaries. The reason is simple. Field research is an inescapably social activity. All field research involves human interaction. Even those who spend most of their time in archives, as the authors point out, interact with others, such as archivists, administrators, and other researchers. Indeed, the sociality of field research is what makes it at once exhausting and enlightening, not just for political scientists but for all scholars, regardless of discipline.

This commonality of experience suggests that those who teach graduate courses in field research and other qualitative-interpretive methods should encourage students to read broadly and to go beyond the discipline when they do literature searches on specific topics or methods. In my own research for a book on interviewing,[5] for example, I drew from work by scholars in Human Geography and Public Policy to learn the debates around elite interviewing.[6] Similarly, the few articles I found on working with assistants and interpreters also came from scholars outside Political Science.[7] I would urge students and teachers of qualitative methods to plumb the literatures from other disciplines for insights relevant to their own work since issues of power, access, and ethics in the field do not vary by discipline.

Structural Privilege and Inequalities

The second area that merits further discussion is the way that privilege and inequality operate not only in the field, but also before researchers ever leave home. Structural forms of privilege and inequality shape field research and researchers in several ways.

First, going to the field is a privilege in and of itself. Just because funders, Institutional Review Boards (or their equivalent), and dissertation supervisors have given a project the "green light" does not give researchers an automatic "right" to intervene in people's lives without considering the power implications of what they are doing. With the exception of librarians and archivists, perhaps, no one in a field research setting is obliged to talk with or help researchers. When people do agree to help, the benefits often accrue mainly to the researcher; fieldwork enables researchers to write dissertations, earn PhDs, land jobs, and further careers. Some participants can and do benefit from taking part in a research project (such as talking to an attentive listener or being paid to take part in a focus group), but few can claim the professional benefits that researches do.

Second is the issue of funding. As the authors point out, only those with adequate funds can conduct field research. Those with more resources tend to come from the top twenty schools in the United States. With greater sources of funding, researchers can do more. They can stay longer in the field, do more interviews, expand their surveys, or add other components to their projects. The authors acknowledge that unequal levels of funding threaten to deepen inequalities that already exist in the

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discipline.[8] I would argue that the problem goes deeper. The most privileged graduate students can undertake more ambitious projects than those with limited resources. More ambitious projects, in turn, can help to constitute those scholars as more skilled and accomplished than their peers. Yet, like most forms of inequality that masquerade as merit, going to the field does not make researchers part of the privileged set. Many start out more privileged, which is how they are able to go to the field in the first place.

Third, the same forms of privilege and inequality likely shape where scholars go to do fieldwork. The authors urge researchers to "spread out" and tackle understudied parts of the world. But where are the incentives to do so, particularly for graduate students who do not come from an elite school and have limited resources to do field research? What are the incentives and rewards for studying difficult languages and doing all the necessary preparatory work that "spreading out" requires? If anything, there are disincentives to studying those parts of the world where others might question the generalizability of the findings.

Another way in which privilege works through and for certain field researchers is that those who do go to the field often set or maintain the standards for what constitutes superior field research for the discipline as a whole. The gold standard of late has been "multi-method" research, that is, incorporating more than one type of technique for collecting data in the same project. Most respondents in the authors' study reported using more than one method. However, not all methods carry equal weight in the discipline. As the authors themselves point out, oral histories tend to be viewed as having "low scientific value" because of the particularity of people's life stories, which limits their generalizability (p. 200).[9] Even "respected" methods like interviewing can be devalued, especially when harnessed to an interpretivist methodology. For example, reviewers of my own work have referred to the data I gathered through interviews in Rwanda as "anecdotal" or insisted that there must be some basis for generalizing beyond an interpretivist explanation for social action. Put simply, not all methods (and methodologies) carry the same *social* value in the discipline. This, too, creates powerful incentives for field researchers to adopt some methods and approaches over others in an effort to appear more legitimate and legible to hiring committees and reviewers.

In sum, structural forms of privilege and inequality tend to be reflected and reproduced in all areas of field research, from who *gets* to go to the field, where those researchers go, the kinds of projects they undertake, and which methods and approaches they use.

A Call for More Reflexivity

The last topic deserving of further discussion is reflexivity. This, I would argue, is the one key principle missing from the book. What do I mean by reflexivity? The term has a long history in the social sciences.[10] It comes in many guises and pertains to many different areas of the research process, including positionality, accountability, and ethics.[11] Roni Berger refers to reflexivity as "the process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of the researcher's positionality;"[12] Linda Finlay to "researchers engag[ing] in explicit self-aware meta-analysis;"[13] and Barbara Probst to a "process of self-examination . . . through specific actions" such as journal writing.[14] I find Schwartz-Shea's definition the most useful: "a keen awareness of, and theorizing about, the role of the self in all phases of the research process."[15]

As these definitions indicate, reflexivity is not synonymous with Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read's notion of critical reflection, one of the six principles they advocate for good field research. Reflexivity is a thicker and more expansive concept that includes not only the kind of ongoing self-assessment to which the authors refer, but also a focus on the researcher's intervention *at the social level* and all the power dynamics and meaning-making that intervention entails. As Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater notes, "to be reflective does not demand an 'other,' while to be reflexive demands both an other and some self-conscious awareness of the process of self-scrutiny."[16]

The benefits of greater reflexivity are many. It can help to ensure greater awareness of the ethical dimensions of fieldwork, sources of privilege the researcher might be taking for granted, and power dynamics that may mark various relationships in the field. Reflexivity can also add to the rigor of the data and the integrity of the project as a whole by ensuring greater accountability for the arguments and claims researchers make, which, in turn, can enable reviewers, search committees, and dissertation advisors to assess the research and findings with greater acuity. Reflexivity can also encourage researchers to become more aware of their own sense-making so that they can turn unplanned, unscripted, and unstructured observations in the field into valuable sources of data and insight.[17] In the remainder of the essay, I focus on two specific areas where reflexivity matters: theorizing informal observations and heightening the researcher's ethical awareness around working relationships in the field.

Reflexivity concerns the researcher's gaze outward as well as her gaze inward, back to herself. These observations, however, do not drop into a researcher's lap pre-analyzed. The researcher must make sense of them. Take, for example, Elisabeth Wood's observation that the "gossip, jokes, and teasing of one another (and of me)" which participants engaged in as they drew large maps of the land they worked, were important sources of insight for her study. Wood offers a self-critique, a prime example of reflexivity.

> In retrospect I am aware of many mistakes I made during my field research, of which two deserve mention. I wish I had better recorded the comments, jokes, and discussions that occurred during the map-drawing sessions. I was slow to understand the

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> value of those interactions as I initially had an overly simple understanding of what the maps represented. Only later did I come to understand the maps as documents demonstrating the emergence of a new political culture rather than as illustrations of land occupations.[18]

Further reflexivity may have enabled Wood to figure out *how* she came to realize that the joking and commentary were important. What was the process or "aha" moment that enabled her to see these exchanges as something more than banter? What made her realize the teasing and joking constituted "meta-data,"[19] and, as such, were important sources of insight in their own right?

This example also suggests the importance of linking informal observations to the larger research project. Wood, for example, may have been overly focused on what the finished maps would tell her, rather than on what the *map-making process* was also revealing. The very act of drawing large maps of their land, in a group and as a group, may have turned the exercise into an act of political assertion for the map-makers, all rural peasants living in El Salvador during that country's civil war. The joking and teasing aimed at Wood, moreover, might have been a way to acknowledge her belonging in the group, transforming her from a detached observer to a fellow actor engaged in a political exercise, and not just a research task. The way that researchers can make such discoveries is by bringing to light their own meaning-making processes and situating the resulting insights in the context of the larger project.

A second area where greater reflexivity matters to field research is ethical awareness about the relationships that researchers develop in the field other than those they establish with participants. In many international projects, researchers may enlist the help of local assistants, interpreters, translators, drivers, and fixers, but without necessarily giving much thought to the personal well-being of these "hired hands" when incorporating them into their projects. This is not surprising since IRB rules in the United States, at least, focus solely on participants. Graduate training and socialization also push researchers to think strategically about their research and instrumentally about the people they hire to assist them. Yet, these working relationships may also raise questions about the ethical responsibilities and obligations of the researcher. If a researcher hires a local assistant, for example, what constitutes a fair wage? And fair for whom—the researcher who has dug into her own pocket to fund the fieldwork or the local assistant, for whom job prospects are scarce? And what if the researcher needs to extend or shorten the term of work? Or what if the working relationship does not work out? Should the researcher pay severance or nothing at all?

In addition to "labor" questions, the researcher might also need to consider the social costs and risks that the assistant is undertaking, especially since dilemmas of "proximity"—being seen or associated with the researcher—can exact a toll on local assistants.[20] Thomas Molony, for example, hired a young, female assistant while he was doing research in Tanzania. As a result of working with Molony and walking around town with him, the assistant suffered verbal taunts from young men who shouted names at her and called her a prostitute.[21] Assistants can suffer other types of hardships as well, such as traveling long distances and being away from their families for extended periods.[22] To what extent should the researcher try to minimize these risks and costs, especially when doing so impinges on the researcher's budget, schedule, or plans?

These issues also bear on the related question of how we should teach field methods and ethics, a question that the authors repeatedly raise. Indeed, this may be one of the book's most important contributions—motivating a larger discussion of how we should train and socialize students about what constitutes good field research, regardless of methods, methodology, or topic. I would argue that training should include a more *humanist* and less instrumental approach toward fieldwork. A humanist stance would encourage the researcher to see others (as well as herself) as human beings deserving of respect and dignity. This re-orientation would place ethical awareness and reflexivity on par with questions about research design, methods, and logistics. It would also create a different standard of accountability when professional incentives pull researchers in one direction and ethical responsibilities in another. Viewed from this perspective, field research becomes less about how and what scholars do *to* others (e.g., surveying, interviewing, observing, sampling), and more about what we do *with* others, particularly those who make our fieldwork possible in the first place.

Notes

1 The authors focus on Political Science as practiced in the United States, which means they do not examine variation in the norms, practices, and ethics regulations in departments in other parts of the world, such as Canada, Australia, and Europe.
2 The authors used the National Research Council's 1995 rankings to arrive at their list of the top 20 departments in the US (p. 64, fn 41).
3 One important exception is Pachirat 2011, which provides an extremely thoughtful analysis of the ethics of using deceptive methods.
4 Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2014; Schatz 2009; Soss 2000; Schaffer 2016; Pachirat 2011.
5 Fujii n.d.
6 Herod 1999; Cochrane 1998; McDowell 1998; Neal and McLaughlin 2009; Odendahl and Shaw 2002.
7 Turner 2010; Molony and Hammett 2007; Pasquini and Olaniyan 2004.
8 For sake of brevity, I do not discuss other forms of structural inequality that would also bear on this

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discussion, such as race and gender. I thank Sam Majic for reminding me of this point.

9 For a powerful counter-argument to this claim, see Monroe 2004 and Rudolph and Rudolph 2003 from Political Science; Portelli 1991; 2011 from History; and Blee 1993 from Sociology.

10 Finlay 2002, 209–12; Schwartz-Shea 2014, 132–33.

11 Probst 2015.

12 Berger 2015, 200.

13 Finlay 2002, 209.

14 Probst 2015, 38.

15 Schwartz-Shea 2014, 133.

16 Chiseri-Strater 1996, 130, cited in Pillow 2003, 177.

17 Fujii 2014.

18 Wood 2006, 376.

19 Fujii 2010.

20 Fujii 2012.

21 Molony and Hammett 2007, 297.

22 Turner 2010.

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