Field Closeting: Navigating Fieldwork as a Queer Scholar

Campbell M. Stevens, *USA*

Fieldwork is fraught with methodological and ethical concerns, particularly for those junior scholars seeking to establish themselves. There is a pressure to conduct research that pushes the boundaries of emerging techniques and brings our theories to bear on case studies that are underrepresented in the literature. Although this pressure is felt by nearly everyone, the barriers to accessing fieldwork and the premium of privilege lead to significant inequalities (Fujii 2016), which are becoming increasingly apparent as the academy diversifies. Being a white cis-male, I have benefited from overarching systems of privilege across my education, my career, and my international fieldwork. Yet as a gay man, international fieldwork poses potential challenges, illuminating additional realities with which researchers must contend.[1]

My specialization is postcommunist Eurasia, and most of my fieldwork experience has been in the Russian Federation, which has an increasingly hostile relationship to queer populations. Being queer has not been easy in Russia for some time (Healey 2018), but implementation of the infamous 2013 "gay propaganda" law signaled a fundamental shift in the sociopolitical landscape and affected my dissertation fieldwork, which was conducted across several regional capitals from 2013–14. This law forbids any positive or supportive expression of queer identities or queer relationships in the presence of those under 18 years of age. The Russian state has implemented this law alongside "foreign agents" legislation, which gives the government punitive regulatory powers over nonprofit organizations that accept international funding. Enforced in concert, these laws effectively frame queer identities and queer-rights organizations as external threats; they are often described as Western conspirators seeking to corrode Russian society (Kondakov 2022).

This article illuminates additional risks that queer researchers may face in the field and highlights the costs of mitigating strategies so they are not overlooked. Openly expressed queer identities can affect researchers' access to field sites, increase physical and legal risks to researchers once in the field, and harm associated interlocutors. For instance, changes in Russian society affected my fieldwork and continue to affect my career. Were this piece to be publicly attributable to me as a researcher, I would face greater chances of having visa applications and interview requests denied, and I would increase the risk of harm to myself in the field and to my Russian interlocuters, who are under ever-expanding state surveillance (Parkhomenko 2021). This is the basis for my discussion of the concept of "field closeting" as a means to mitigate these risks, but I also highlight its psychological toll and negative impact on relationships inside and outside fieldwork. By recognizing the potential strains on queer researchers in the field, we can amplify and reinforce the contributions of scholars seeking to improve our practice of qualitative fieldwork methods in support of a diversifying academy.

FIELD CLOSETING IN THEORY

Navigating fieldwork requires an awareness of the researcher's relationships to their study participants, professional connections, and broader social networks. Rightfully, the onus has been placed on recognizing the degree of power that the researcher brings to the field (Fujii 2012), but this power dynamic is a relational one. Each field site has its own sociopolitical realities. Researchers, particularly those who have a marginalized identity in their fieldwork contexts, are constrained by their respective field sites. Some have used their own marginality as women to embed themselves safely (Sirnate 2014), whereas others have selectively revealed identities to affect in-group and out-group perceptions (Chambers 2020; Tewksbury and Gagné 1997). In such situations, researchers' marginalized identities can be transformed from being a liability to an asset in fieldwork as they "overcome distrust and earn trust" (Marks 2020, 25). They are also subject to interpersonal and circumstantial dynamics outside their control or ability to anticipate, as their interlocuters and study participants react to their engagement (Chacko 2004; Townsend-Bell 2009). For queer researchers, the social dynamics surrounding their respective queer identity in fieldwork are difficult and have received little focus. Although it is important that queer researchers have been included in fieldwork discussions (Chambers 2020; Driscoll 2021; Sirnate 2014), their experiences require further consideration.

The selective revealing or obscuring of a researcher's queer identity for the purposes of safely conducting fieldwork involves a difficult decision-making process that I call "field closeting." In this process, a researcher purposefully adjusts their expression and even public recognition of their queer identity. The closet in US society is colloquially understood as a queer person attempting to hide or obscure their queer identity in its entirety. Each new encounter and new acquaintance require "new calculations, new draughts, and requisitions of secrecy or disclosure" to maximize safety and acceptance in social environments, which causes the closet to be a "fundamental feature of social life" (Sedgwick 2008, 68). The colloquial concept evokes a binary of aggregated

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of American Political Science Association

doi:10.1017/S1049096523000859

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096523000859 Published online by Cambridge University Press

behavioral outcomes: either the uninhibited public expression of a queer identity or its total denial (i.e., those who have "left" the closet will not reenter it). I argue that this conceptualization fails to acknowledge the agency of the queer individual. The boundaries of the closet are adjustable and deployable; they do not require a constant and absolute denial of an identity as the colloquial definition implies. It is this flexibility that offers a queer researcher the means to adjust to social realities in their field site.

This description of field closeting may be familiar to researchers holding a range of marginalized identities, and not solely queer identities; yet a fundamental concern for queer researchers engaging in field closeting is that a failure to do so successfully can place their research and their safety at risk. Queer researchers who refuse to disclose the existence of significant others or to adopt salient gender roles are inhibited by the heteronormative standards of the field from acting freely in their fieldwork contexts, but researchers also play an agential role in determining the size and scope of the field closet they deploy (McDonald 2016). In my description, a larger field closet equates to more of a queer researcher's identity and expression being concealed. Although it is far from having the ethical implications of covert methodologies, field closeting can nevertheless yield similar ethical and personal dilemmas with interlocutors, because "the paradox was getting close to them without them getting close to me" (Calvey 2008, 912). Because the field closet is adjustable, some queer researchers engage in field closeting without much difficulty. Yet studies show significant differences in mental health outcomes—particularly depression and anxiety—among queer men and women in relation to their public expression of queer identity (Pachankis, Cochran, and Mays 2015). My experience in the Russian Federation demonstrates that the adjustability of the field closet can be a protective measure, but it can also place queer scholars at risk beyond fieldwork as hostility to queer identities takes on geopolitical salience and increasing intensity.

Queer researchers who refuse to disclose the existence of significant others or to adopt salient gender roles are inhibited by the heteronormative standards of the field from acting freely in their fieldwork contexts, but researchers also play an agential role in determining the size and scope of the field closet they deploy (McDonald 2016).

FIELD CLOSETING IN RUSSIA

My experiences in Russia before I began my dissertation fieldwork informed the approximate conditions of the field closet within which I would function. Over a period of six years during which I learned Russian and engaged in initial research, my experiences in regional capitals in Russia shaped the dimensions of my initial field closet: I would conceal my gay identity altogether, except among close acquaintances whom I could trust. The scope of my field closet was reasonable given the urban areas I lived in, which offered the benefit of anonymity and varying degrees of liberal thought. These stays in Russia were brief, which reduced the strain of existing within that field closet. These experiences confirmed that I could use my research methods without issue and could maintain my personal health and safety as I continued my graduate education.

Just before my dissertation fieldwork began in 2013, however, the Russian government passed the "gay propaganda" bill, which led to considerable uncertainty regarding whether my established field closet was suitable. I had observed an increasing antipathy toward queer identities and queer expression in Russia; yet enshrining these views in national law represented a discernible increase in insecurity for me as a gay researcher. The first arrest made under this law occurred in my primary field site: a man stood in a pedestrian thoroughfare holding a sign that read, "Being gay and loving gays is normal. Beating gays and killing gays is a crime" (Guillory 2013). National-level anti-queer laws were affecting my field site directly and altering my perception of its relative safety. My research project required traveling to several regional capitals where I did not have prior experience, and stories emerged of violent attacks on gay men throughout Russia being filmed and posted online to "out" them (Balmforth 2013).

Given this rapidly shifting sociopolitical context immediately preceding my year-long research project, I altered my methods while significantly expanding my field closet to best protect myself. I changed my project focus to concentrate on archival work and publicly identifiable regional elites, rather than including ordinary citizens relevant to my research. I worried about my ability to maintain an expanded field closet in more personal exchanges of trust with everyday people, whereas my prior fieldwork experience gave me confidence that I would not have an issue achieving the trust sufficient for elite-level interviews. To expand my field closet, I altered my social media profiles to reduce the chance that acquaintances, past or potential, would discover my same-sex partner, and I prepared to curtail an active social life in the field out of fear that I would be put into situations where more elaborate concealment would be necessary.

These were choices I felt compelled to take, because I had received precious funding for my fieldwork and my career was just beginning. I had existed in a closet of roughly that size before I had self-identified as a gay man, and I resolved I could do it again, particularly with my privileges as a white cis-male intact. My partner, however, was unwilling to reenter any

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096523000859 Published online by Cambridge University Press

closet and was appalled that I would be willing to do so, and our relationship ended. The personal toll of field closeting was increasing and would continue in unanticipated ways.

NATIONALITY AS LIABILITY AND ETHICAL UNCERTAINTY

In the first few months of fieldwork, I devoted all my research time to prepare for and obtain interviews with regional legislators, and I was preparing to collect data by using my nationality to my advantage as I had successfully done in the past. Working in regional capitals offered me greater prestige and professional opportunities, because I was considered a rare commodity: an American scholar. I could leverage my nationality as an asset to offer lectures, give advice on grant and conference proposals, and connect people within my professional networks. These dynamics reflected the power and responsibility I was trained to be cognizant of as I conducted research. Though I was struggling personally, my field experience and my methods were yielding the anticipated results.

In early 2014, however, the Crimean annexation and the outbreak of the war in eastern Ukraine transformed my US nationality into a liability for my research. The annexation of Crimea was so rapid that it unleashed cascades of uncertainty regarding the Kremlin's goals within and outside Russia. Suddenly, my regional political interlocutors were not responding to my inquiries; I was eventually told that no one knew what information was sensitive or should not be discussed. Yet I hoped that the boundaries of acceptable inquiry would settle and allow me to reestablish my connections. The outbreak of violence in eastern Ukraine ended such hopes, when sanctions against Russia were levied and distrust of Americans increased precipitously. I experienced such distrust when attending a press conference of activists encouraging local Russians to volunteer for the war in Ukraine. In the proceedings, it was acknowledged that the geopolitical situation was grave because there were Americans in every room, all of whom were working for the CIA. In this context of such sociopolitical anxiety, my project was in shambles, and I would need a new approach.

It was during this time of project redesign that I was beaten in the street by three young men. I was walking home from the gym that I had recently joined to improve my mental and physical health. After the assault, I did not want to talk to police or file a report, because that would expose me to interactions that I did not have experience managing. The assailants had not used any weapons, which suggested a lack of premeditation, nor did they say anything that suggested a collective, coherent motivation for the assault.

The unprecedented assault did not have a seriously impact on my physical health, but it left me wondering whether my methods were putting myself and any interlocutors or study participants at risk. I could not determine whether I was attacked as an expression of anti-American sentiment or whether I was more perceptible as a gay man than I understood. In short, I struggled to evaluate my positionality and exposure to risk. If the intent had been to intimidate or harm me because of a specific identity, I presumed that would have been communicated. I therefore concluded that the attack was random and that my interlocutors and study participants were not at greater risk of harm.

The need to adapt field methods in response to changing local dynamics is not a new concern, whether in authoritarian or democratic regimes, but the changes in Russian society added considerable uncertainty regarding my exposure to risk. In my field sites, this transformation constituted a "scientific closure" that made my nationality and my gay identity difficult to contend with (Markowitz 2016). The assault's effect on my everyday life in the field was noticeable. I internalized a sense of insecurity and expanded my field closet such that I withdrew from nearly all socializing, particularly when I traveled to other regional capitals to conduct interviews. This expansion reflected my confidence in deploying a field closet for interpersonal exchanges but my lack of confidence in its capacity to mitigate broader sociopolitical concerns. Yet my decision to withdraw as much as possible from society also reflected the privilege of my nationality. The maximally expanded field closet was clearly not sustainable, but it would only be needed until I could leave for the United States, which demonstrates the strength of the privileges I retained in the midst of an uncertain period. As such, I reconfigured my project, gathered the remaining interview data I could over the summer of 2014, and returned to the United States hoping to disassemble my field closet.

FIELD CLOSETING AT HOME AND SUBSEQUENT ADAPTATIONS

My field closet, however, could not be disassembled as I had hoped, and I have since discovered that the protection it can offer is not limited to fieldwork. After my return to the United States to write my dissertation and enter the academic job market, it was suggested repeatedly that I leverage my gay identity to my advantage by making clear indications on social media and professional activism. Unfortunately, my field closet has remained deployed to protect myself for future trips to postcommunist Eurasia, which continues to engage in anti-queer rhetoric and policies for their authoritarian populist appeal. In Russia, for example, an expanded law was passed in December 2022 that makes punishable *any* expression of queer identities and queer relationships in public: it effectively seeks to eliminate queer expression from public life (Sauer 2022). This reflexively will shape how I will pursue subsequent fieldwork in the region (Sultana 2007), and it continues to inform my identity as a gay man in my daily life in the United States. The field closet I maintain while outside the field is small, requiring efforts like publishing this article anonymously, but I cannot fully disassemble it if I am to travel and conduct research safely in the world region in which I have accrued expertise.[2]

All researchers must be prepared to alter their methods as needed in the field, but queer researchers may face distinct obstacles that field closeting may not sufficiently address. Even as conditions changed and I adapted accordingly, I was subject to an exchange of power with my field site, and I was

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096523000859 Published online by Cambridge University Press

left uncertain as to whether I was taking appropriate measures. Undoubtedly, queer scholars can and should engage in fieldwork. Necessary precautions should be acknowledged and incorporated in fieldwork's design and execution, including the psychological strain of field closeting. Yet field closeting should not be seen as a universal option, equally suited for every researcher. Instead, by excavating the breadth of fieldwork experiences, we can improve our work to ensure the well-being of the researcher and those involved in their research as we design our own projects, mentor others in their design, and evaluate the contributions of fellow scholars.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank the two anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments that substantially improved this piece and to acknowledge the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) for its generous support of the fieldwork discussed here.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

NOTES

1. Throughout this article, I use the label "gay man" to acknowledge my positionality in my fieldwork and the specificity of my experiences. I use "queer" to reference the broader spectrum of identities and experiences that exist outside heteronormativity, rather than "LGBTQ," because the acronym prioritizes sexual orientation and potentially excludes identities that may contend with field closeting, such as nonbinary scholars. I acknowledge the potential tensions in using "queer" as an umbrella term (Orne 2017), but I use it to indicate that the dilemmas raised in this piece do not apply solely to gay men. Thus, I describe my individual experiences as a gay man, and I consider myself and these experiences as relevant within the broader community of queer scholars.
2. Disturbingly, the authoritarian populist appeal is evident in the United States as seen by the hundreds of recently proposed bills targeting queer populations, especially trans people, which effectively erode the distinctions between field closeting and everyday life for some queer scholars (ACLU 2023; Shin, Kirkpatrick, and Branigin 2023). Under such conditions, these scholars are likely to engage initially in behaviors borrowed from experiences in field closeting but then may adopt more comprehensive protective habits of social closeting, as described by Sedgwick (2008). Undoubtedly, any queer researchers resorting to these behaviors will suffer the harmful tolls described previously in their everyday life, which will have a negative impact on their ability to engage in field closeting in their fieldwork because there is little respite available in which to recover from the strains.

REFERENCES

ACLU. 2023, June 23. "Mapping Attacks on LGBTQ Rights in U.S. State Legislatures." *American Civil Liberties Union*. https://www.aclu.org/legislative-attacks-on-lgbtq-rights.

Balmforth, Tom. 2013. "In Russia, Violent Videos Show a Startling New Form of Gay Bullying." *The Atlantic*. https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/08/in-russia-violent-videos-show-a-startling-new-form-of-gay-bullying/278294/.

Calvey, David. 2008. "The Art and Politics of Covert Research: Doing `Situated Ethics' in the Field." *Sociology* 42 (5): 905–18.

Chacko, Elizabeth. 2004. "Positionality and Praxis: Fieldwork Experiences in Rural India." *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 25 (1): 51–63.

Chambers, Joseph. 2020. "When Fieldwork Falls Apart: Navigating Disruption from Political Turmoil in Research." *Area* 52 (2): 437–44.

Driscoll, Jesse. 2021. *Doing Global Fieldwork: A Social Scientist's Guide to Mixed-Methods Research Far from Home*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Fujii, Lee Ann. 2012. "Research Ethics 101: Dilemmas and Responsibilities." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 45 (4): 717–23.

Fujii, Lee Ann. 2016. "Politics of the 'Field.'" *Perspectives on Politics* 14 (4): 1147–52.

Guillory, Sean. 2013. "Repression and Gay Rights in Russia." https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/repression-and-gay-rights-russia.

Healey, Dan. 2018. *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi*. London: Bloomsbury.

Kondakov, Alexander Sasha. 2022. *Violent Affections: Queer Sexuality, Techniques of Power, and Law in Russia*. London: UCL Press.

Markowitz, Lawrence P. 2016. "Scientific Closure and Research Strategies in Uzbekistan." *Social Science Quarterly* 97 (4): 894–908.

Marks, Zoe. 2020. "Cooking Soup and Killing Chickens: Navigating Gender and Food-as-Fieldwork in West Africa." In *Stories from the Field: A Guide to Navigating Fieldwork in Political Science*, eds. Peter Krause and Ora Szekely, 23–35. New York: Columbia University Press.

McDonald, James. 2016. "Expanding Queer Reflexivity: The Closet as a Guiding Metaphor for Reflexive Practice." *Management Learning* 47 (4): 391–406.

Orne, Jason. 2017. *Boystown: Sex & Community in Chicago*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Pachankis, John E., Susan D. Cochran, and Vickie M. Mays. 2015. "The Mental Health of Sexual Minority Adults in and out of the Closet: A Population-Based Study." *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 83 (5): 890–901.

Parkhomenko. 2021. "Living in the Shadow of Russia's Foreign Agents Law: A Conversation with Galina Arapova." *Wilson Center*. https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/living-shadow-russias-foreign-agents-law-conversation-galina-arapova.

Sauer, Pjotr. 2022. "Russia Passes Law Banning 'LGBT Propaganda' among Adults." *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/24/russia-passes-law-banning-lgbt-propaganda-adults.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. 2008. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Rev. ed. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Shin, Annys, Nick Kirkpatrick, and Anne Branigin. 2023, May 19. "Anti-Trans Bills Have Doubled since 2022: Our Map Shows Where States Stand." *Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2023/04/17/anti-trans-bills-map/.

Sirnate, Vasundhara. 2014. "Positionality, Personal Insecurity, and Female Empathy in Security Studies Research." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 47 (2): 398–401.

Sultana, Farhana. 2007. "Reflexivity, Positionality and Participatory Ethics: Negotiating Fieldwork Dilemmas in International Research." *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies* 6 (3): 374–85.

Tewksbury, Richard, and Patricia Gagné. 1997. "Assumed and Presumed Identities: Problems of Self-Presentation in Field Research." *Sociological Spectrum* 17: 127–55.

Townsend-Bell, Erica. 2009. "Being True and Being You: Race, Gender, Class, and the Fieldwork Experience." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 42 (2): 311–14.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096523000859 Published online by Cambridge University Press