SYMPOSIUM

Being True and Being You: Race, Gender, Class, and the Fieldwork Experience

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Fieldwork advice has increased and improved over the years. Yet, the bulk of political science fieldwork advice is general; it assumes that the subject to whom advice is given is simply a political scientist—in training, perhaps—with no other salient identities that might intercede (but see Mazzei and O'Brien 2005 and the *PS* 2006 fieldwork symposium, The Methodologies of Field Research in the Middle East, for recent exceptions). Of course in reality it is not just the fieldwork setting that varies; the relationship of the researcher to the field matters a great deal—and that may be much more dependent on our specific identities than we have previously credited. It is not simply the subjects that we study, but us as well who have to negotiate sometimes sticky issues of race, class, gender, nationality, and so forth.

I utilize my dissertation field-research experiences to reflect on the role of race, class, gender, and privilege (and disadvantage) in the fieldwork experience. I argue that the lessons of intersectionality theory—that we are *all* raced, classed, and gendered (and sexed and nationalized)—are especially important in the fieldwork experience. This recognition should be a central focus of both fieldwork preparation, and analysis and interpretation of the research. I focus on two issues in particular: consideration of one's "fit" in the field, and the balance between ethics and solidarity. Identity forms your assumptions, affects the kinds of questions you ask, and the evidence you seek. If you ignore how your identities impact interpretation then you are arguably mis-specifying your research model. In this piece, I draw on the lessons of dissertation fieldwork that I conducted in Uruguay over several trips between 2002 and 2005, during which I researched the evolution of race, class, and gender identities and their impact on the development of multi-racial feminist coalitions.

THE FIT QUESTION

For some the fit question—how and whether the researcher differs in fundamental ways from the respondents—is obvious. For instance, Jillian Schwedler (2006) addresses the best way for a Western woman to proceed in fieldwork in the Middle East, dealing with questions concerning whether to veil or not, how to maintain safety and integrity, and so on. Kathleen Blee (2003) discusses her strategies for gaining access to women in the organized hate movement in the United States. But many of us need to be reminded that preparation for fieldwork does not stop at making sure that we have established contacts, booked transportation, and gathered the necessary materials.

It was shortly before I left for the field for the first time. Per my professor's advice I had chosen a field site early in my graduate career, giving me plenty of time to explore the political landscape and to establish a set of concrete research questions. Up to that point my concerns primarily had been about securing lodging in an unknown country, how long it would take me to pick up the Uruguayan dialect, the quality of my interview questions, and whether I would be able to find anyone who would consent to answer them. In other words, I had the typical fieldwork preparation concerns. I checked in with my professor one final time before leaving. We chatted for a while about my research agenda and then: "By the way," he said, "do you know how you might be received when you're there?" he paused searching for a good way to communicate his concern, "I've heard people say some pretty crazy things. They say them to me and think it's okay because I'm a white guy . . . but you might want to prepare yourself. I don't know if anyone will say anything *directly* to you but . . ." he trailed off.[1]

He was right, and wrong, though probably not exactly in the ways that he might have imagined. It was very rare that I heard "racist" comments or was treated rudely. Indeed in three trips totaling seven months over four years, I can count those instances on less than one hand. I was not talked down to for being a (young) black woman, but certainly not because (some) Uruguayans are not capable of—or have not been documented—enacting such behavior. Instead what protected me was my class and nationality privilege. By my very appearance I was clearly not a "typical" Afro-Uruguayan woman. My clothing and my hair immediately situated me as middle class and, hence, likely not Uruguayan.[2]

My difference had important impacts on my fieldwork and my subsequent interpretations of the field environment, although in different ways. My obvious "middle classness," my atypicality, meant that I was not treated like the average Afro-Uruguayan woman. This worried me; the fact that (from my perspective) I looked just like the people I was researching and that we had somewhat similar histories gave me a greater sense of affinity with them and perhaps—I hoped—greater insight into the issues surrounding race, class, and gender identities and politics in a supposedly color-blind society. In sum, our supposed similarities led me to feel a greater rapport with my Afro-Uruguayan counterparts. But did they feel such an affinity with me? Black or not, I was coming from a middle-class, educated,

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Western background. Beyond demographic differences, there were power differences among us. I had greater mobility and access in Uruguayan society than many Afro-Uruguayan women. I could not simply ignore that.[3] I realized then that rapport can never be taken for granted, regardless of the person or the site. As Mazzei and O'Brien (2005, 6) note, "rapport and true access are not foregone conclusions … [there is a great] distinction between being a presence in the field, and being recognized as a member of the community."

On the other hand, my difference—my obvious irregularity and the mobility and access that it granted me—perhaps increased the degree of rapport I had with other interview subjects. As is well known, race in Latin America is not fixed. In particular one's class and educational status can help to move one up (or down) on the race spectrum. The fact that I was an educated, middle-class, North American woman mitigated my blackness to some degree. Hence I was more like the (white) women and men I interviewed in terms of background, education, and class status. This may have granted me greater access and ability to ask sensitive questions. My race—and the fact that I am from the U.S., where we tend to be "obsessed by race" as a Uruguayan friend once commented—helped respondents to understand why I was interested in questions of race and gender in Uruguay.

But the fact that race was not always my most salient characteristic meant that other attributes, such as my gender, were sometimes primary. I could, and did, use my gender privilege to ask difficult questions in soft, non-threatening, non-judgmental ways that helped to put respondents at greater ease. Indeed, I sometimes took a tack that Julie Mazzei (with Erin O'Brien 2005) has written about as well, implying a certain naïveté that required respondents to enlighten me. I never did this explicitly; to have done so would have offended my feminist principles. Indeed I most frequently relied on my Americaness as the source of this supposed naïveté—after all we are both obsessed with race, and ignorant of the world. Of course this notion—at least for the average academic I would like to hope—is as ridiculous as is the idea that women need to be enlightened. But I recognized that whether I self-identified as prototypically American, or female, or black, or not, does not necessarily change others' perceptions of what those categories mean. Each individual researcher has to determine how best to approach that reality.

Hence, my specific raced, classed, gendered, and national identities functioned in distinct and context-dependent ways, and in various combinations. My assumptions of how my difference might have functioned were not always correct, in part because one can never be sure what to expect of the field before arriving, but also because I spent so much time worrying about the research from an objective perspective that I forgot to consider the question of my relationship to the field and my fit with the members of the field. Thoughtful and informed reflection prior to leaving for the field would likely have divorced me of any notion of automatic affinity with Afro-Uruguayan women based on shared gender and skin color.[4]

Certainly this is not a suggestion that one can (or should attempt to be) all-knowing. Other lessons can only be learned once one arrives. For instance, I could not have known that regardless of the general protection my middle-class appearance afforded me, it would not stop some Uruguayan (and Argentine) men from automatically assuming me to be a prostitute—like all black women, or so they think.

ETHICS AND SOLIDARITY

As I noted, it was unreasonable and naïve of me to assume that Afro-Uruguayan women would feel an automatic rapport with me. However, this did not and does not negate the fact that I do feel a strong bond with them. Both my graduate and current research agenda are informed by my concern that the work I do is important. Questions of identity formation and deployment are theoretically important to political scientists, especially where the answer to the question of why certain identities form and become salient is not obvious. But beyond this, I feel that my work has value to the black community—in the diasporic sense—more generally, and this is important to me. Yet as proponents of feminist research methods have consistently noted, there is a fine line that one must walk when combining activist sensibilities with research. Murdock (2003) discusses the issues that arise when studying NGOs, especially what she calls "that stubborn doing good question" and

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researchers' desire to underplay the weaknesses of the organizations they study: "My squeamishness about reporting the negatives associated with professionalizing tendencies among feminist NGOs is a complicated response to multiple commitments" (Murdock 2003, 508).

I have dealt with similar issues. I expected that it might be difficult to be critical of "my people." But, in the early phases of my research I did not fully appreciate how our assumptions and associations can impact the research, and thus how careful we must be, not only about creating a rigorous research design and methodology, but about self-examination as well.[5] After I began research on the question of why Uruguayan multi-racial gender coalitions were not as prevalent as one might expect, I realized that my guiding, and only partially conscious, assumption was that I would find the fault with mainstream (e.g., white) women's groups who were either unwilling or unable to bridge the racial divide, and expand their notions of what a true gender politics should and can include. But of course there are two sides to every story and I learned that meeting in the middle only works when both groups—white and Afro-Uruguayan women—are willing to cross the bridge. Even as I gained a more nuanced picture of race, class, and gender dynamics in Uruguay, my knee-jerk desire when discussing and writing about the black feminist groups with which I work was to portray them in the best possible light, overlooking or underemphasizing shortcomings in tactics, strategy, ideology, framing, or other relevant variables.

This desire stemmed from two sides of the same coin. My sense of racial solidarity led me to want to portray black women's groups in the best possible light; assumed expectations of racial solidarity on the part of black groups made me nervous about the consequences of my criticism for future work with said groups. For, though it is often overlooked, what research participants think of us can matter a great deal. What participants think of the researcher most certainly impacts the types of responses they give (or whether the reseacher receives responses at all). In my case what respondents (black and otherwise) think about me matters a great deal. This concern stems both from a feminist methodological perspective that requires me to create as much of a dialogue (emphasis on the *dia*, or two-way direction) as possible with participants (not subjects); and from a more practical perspective—my fieldwork was not a one-shot deal—I needed to establish sufficient rapport to last over a multi-year period.

So I continue to worry about striking a balance between ethics and solidarity, even as I decided that it was unethical and, more importantly, a disservice to all of the groups and individuals with whom I work—especially the black groups—to be anything less than honest in my reports.

The solidarity issue functions in other important ways as well—anyone who has done fieldwork can attest to the difficulties of neutrality when it comes to questions about one's political allegiances and opinions. In some settings the demands on the researcher to express personal beliefs, or to assist participants with some set of tasks, can be great. Bays affirms, "I was also aware that the women and girls with whom I worked used my more privileged position within the broader community as a resource. I wrote letters to schools on behalf of parents, accompanied women to the welfare office, wrote letters to county supervisors and local newspapers criticizing workfare programs" (Bays 1998, 306).

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For me the level-of-engagement question arose in other ways. How much would or *could* I share about my views on George Bush, racism, or feminism? How involved could I reasonably be in grant writing and money gathering efforts for the women's groups? These sticky engagement issues were, for me and the groups with which I worked, a question of the same topics I have been discussing—solidarity, rapport, and privilege. The question of how much I could or should (from my perspective) or would (from theirs) share was directly related to how much I *really* cared. When my answer to some requests or questions was no—or silence—I occasionally noticed tension, although fortunately never a long-lasting one. But especially in these situations, my degree of privilege was obvious, and it has only increased.

I recently returned to Uruguay to visit with the women and men with whom I worked, and to deliver copies of my dissertation as I had promised. I was surprised and somewhat disconcerted to find some participants asking my advice on their groups' business practices, tactics, and strategy. Their rationale was that I officially had the Ph.D. and the professor title, so clearly I must be in a position to give such advice. In most cases I ducked the questions—from my perspective credentials, good will, multiple years on site, and commitment to the organizational and social goals are still not sufficient. I am

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not actually Uruguayan, or Uruguaya, nor Afro-Uruguayan or Afro-Uruguaya, and my inability to inhabit any of those identities means that I feel unqualified to give such advice.[6] And so those sticky questions of solidarity, privilege, and identity continue.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

I conclude briefly and with a few reminders from my experiences. I say reminders because the major lessons of my fieldwork experiences are not new—but they are often overlooked and do bear repeating. First, prepare yourself as fully as possible. Interrogate what you think your relationship to the field and your participants might be. And then continue to reflect on and re-interrogate that once you are actually in the field, and when you have returned from the field. How does your specific person impact the kinds of relationships you have, the kind of access that you are granted? Try to be aware of the unconscious and/or unexamined assumptions that guide your research and writing. And remember above all that this is a process with no end. That I have written about the dissertation fieldwork experience, a past-tense experience, might lead one to believe that I have successfully dealt with the issues raised here. But fieldwork is a continuing process, and these issues take new and different forms at different sites and different times. Interrogation of the relationship between oneself and the field is not only the purview of the neophyte researcher. Reflexivity must be an incessant part of the research process at any stage. ■

NOTES

1. This is the conversation as I remember it. It has been seven years since that conversation, and I do not profess to remember his exact wording and pacing.
2. The lack of a legacy of *de jure* discrimination in South America has had the ironic impact of precluding the development of a black middle class in many Latin American nations, Uruguay included. For more on this see Townsend-Bell (2007).
3. I have since realized that the assumption that I share a fundamental commonality with someone simply because they are of the same race and/or gender as me is no less ridiculous than a similar assumption on the part of a white, heterosexual male (to take the traditional foil). This does not mean that I do not feel a shared bond with the women that I worked with in Uruguay. I do, and I think that it is reciprocated. But it was a bond that we created over time; there was nothing automatic about it and, like any relationship, the bond is stronger with some individuals than with others.
4. And indeed, of the notion that the term Afro-Uruguayan itself is the product of shared understandings and commitments.
5. That is not to say that self-examination eradicates the potential for unrecognized or erroneous assumptions to intrude. Because we are all a product of cultures and backgrounds from which we cannot simply divorce ourselves—even if we might like to—this is impossible. But continuous self-reflection can help to inform both the reader and the researcher about how assumptions might impact the processes we study.
6. Uruguayan refers to men and women, while Uruguaya refers to women only. The same logic follows for Afro-Uruguayan and Afro-Uruguaya.

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