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Practical Lessons for Conducting International Qualitative Fieldwork as a Graduate Student

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Abstract

Qualitative field research can be profoundly rewarding, but it is also a complex task with some unique challenges for early-career scholars. Compounding the problem is the frequent lack of honest conversations about the practicalities of this methodology. Acknowledging the abundant existing literature on qualitative epistemologies, theories, and study designs, we take a different tack in this article. We reflect on our experiences as former graduate students to discuss some of the practical, nuts-and-bolts-type difficulties we faced while conducting international fieldwork for our dissertations. We believe that considerations of the nitty-gritty mechanics are vital but rarely discussed in published writing, instead often gleaned through informal conversations between advisers and students. To begin to address this gap, we outline the primary challenges and most important lessons during four stages of ethnographic research: planning trips, accessing

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field sites, gathering data, and processing evidence. Our objective is to contribute to a more open discussion among colleagues and practitioners, in order to increase the transparency and supportiveness of our field.

Keywords
Ethnography, international fieldwork, logistics, qualitative research, methods

Introduction

Conducting qualitative fieldwork during graduate school is a high-stakes endeavor. It has enormous potential for personal and professional growth but it can also be a stressful experience. Moreover, graduate students working internationally (by which we mean in a country different from where their university is located) often confront specific challenges related to logistics, costs, and cultural adjustment.

Not surprisingly, many students doing this type of work face anxiety and uncertainty. The problem is sometimes made worse by the absence of honest conversations about the practical difficulties involved. Scheduling travel, securing funding, completing visas or paperwork, gaining access, and gathering data require significant planning and problem solving. Although some students can rely on substantial institutional resources, engaged advisers, and supportive peers, others must confront these challenges largely on their own. As a result, both the outcome of their research and their individual experiences differ substantially.

In this paper, we seek to contribute to a frank discussion among researchers of the practical, day-to-day aspects of doing international qualitative fieldwork. We draw on our experiences as former sociology graduate students at The University of Texas at Austin to highlight what were crucial lessons for us. Although our field sites were located in different parts of the world, we do not claim that our stories are representative of all early-career scholars doing this type of work. Instead, we aim to discuss the most salient difficulties we faced along the different stages of procuring evidence: planning, accessing, gathering, and processing. The insecurities associated with this methodology are in part a result of its demanding nature, but they also stem from the lack of opportunities to talk with colleagues about both the particular obstacles faced in the field, and the solutions devised to address them.

An Arduous Task

Qualitative field research combines the potential of great insight with the actuality of remarkable challenges. The work usually entails a combination of two main activities: interviews (conversations with individuals engaged in particular social practices) and ethnography (participant observation of relevant scenes and interactions) (Lareau 2021; Lofland and Lofland 1995). This work is frequently complemented with other methodologies such as focus groups, content analysis of materials, and photography (Luker 2008; Warren and Karner 2010). While specific projects may emphasize one component over the rest, the combination of different forms of evidence generally enhances reliability and allows for fact-checking and triangulation (Denzin and Lincoln 2018).

In addition to much promise, qualitative research also entails considerable financial, temporal, and personal costs. Graduate students are in a difficult position when facing such challenges. The institutional support available to them tends to be more limited compared to most faculty, yet the quality of fieldwork factors significantly into their ability to finish a dissertation and secure postgraduate employment.

Many of these difficulties are common to researchers regardless of the location of their case of study. In other words, in practical terms, the line separating domestic from international fieldwork is frequently hard to distinguish. Students traveling to distant regions within the same country, reaching out to unfamiliar groups of conationals, or trying to enter areas with restricted access experience similar challenges as those working abroad. That being said, international research usually adds specific hurdles. To begin with, foreign travel tends to be more expensive and require extra paperwork. Scholars frequently have to secure visas to travel to their destination—and, if they are not residents of the nation where their university is located, to return as well. The documentation of work and expenses demanded by funding agencies becomes more cumbersome due to the frequent need to translate and contextualize. Currency must be exchanged, and for certain destinations and longer periods of time, this may be a far more complex process than what short tourist trips entail. Moreover, there is always the possibility of cultural or linguistic barriers. Finally, the background of the researcher, coupled with the characteristics of the field, may make work in certain locations more dangerous, which not only complicates research per se, but also can cause universities to demand the hiring of expensive insurance policies and the completion of additional bureaucratic steps.

Of course, situations vary. Some field sites are relatively accessible, inexpensive, and safe, whereas others are difficult to reach (both physically and administratively), cost a lot, and involve substantial risks. Many graduate students receive adequate support from their universities, mentors, and peers, while others do not have the backing they need (Ortega et al. 2024). Some already know acquaintances in the field, while others have to establish such networks after arriving. Yet for all early-career scholars doing fieldwork around the world, the challenges are substantial. Decades of institutional restructuring have imperiled funding for research in the humanities and social sciences (for recent developments, see Walker 2022, SSRC n.d.). Government, nonprofit, and corporate priorities tend to dictate resource streams for overseas research—further marginalizing projects that are critical of powerful entities or that focus on overlooked populations (Calhoun 2009; INCITE 2017). Each year, cases of injury and assault happen in the field (Hanson and Richards 2019; Irgil et al. 2021). In recent decades, the amount and quality of jobs available to graduates has declined substantially, especially in academia (AAUP 2018; Carey 2020; Woolston 2021). The combination of confounding pressures and competing roles cause many early-career scholars to struggle with their mental health (Forrester 2021; Grady et al. 2014, Jago 2002).

To make things more complicated, international qualitative research (in all its forms) is fraught with ethical dilemmas, which are at best only partially addressed by institutional review boards and other formal guidelines (Blee and Currier 2011). The immersion of a practitioner in a dense web of constituencies (both on and off the field) creates obligations to respondents and audiences, whose interests may at times conflict. On the one hand, the extraction of data about the lives of individuals confronts the researcher with difficult questions concerning exploitation (Gonzalez-Lopez 2011), especially when dealing with underprivileged groups. The methodology's origins as a colonial tool to study the "exotic other" raises issues of ethnocentrism and stereotyping (Adjepong 2019). On the other hand, the context specificity of findings, their difficult replicability, and the frequent need for anonymity highlight the responsibilities of researchers toward their colleagues and the public in general. Calls for improving transparency and external review have become more salient lately (Lubet 2017). Researchers must balance the complex interests of the people they study with the legitimate demands of readers in the scientific community and beyond.

Despite all these challenges, qualitative field research can be a deeply rewarding experience and an important tool for understanding complex social processes. Our concern is that by not being straightforward with students about the realities of the work, we increase the chances that their fieldwork will not yield the data needed for an effective dissertation and publishable material. This is particularly concerning given the selection effect created by the academic tendency to publish only successful studies (Contreras 2019). In recent years, there has been an increasing openness to debate the practical aspects of these methodologies (Irgil et al. 2021; Lareau 2021; Luker 2008; Ortega et al. 2024), including calls to collaborate in reflexive discussions of our craft (Wiant Cummins and Brannon 2022). However, discussing the nuts-and-bolts of qualitative fieldwork remains an overlooked aspect of graduate programs, many of which offer only one course which condenses the extensive theoretical and practical aspects of the methodology into one semester (Corte and Irwin 2017; Irgil et al. 2021; Pacheco-Vega 2021). Many factors contribute to this situation. Research-intensive departments tend to disincentivize teaching, making it more difficult for faculty with fieldwork experience to share their know-how in the classroom. Advisers are also frequently asked to supervise large numbers of students, preventing engagement with the specifics of each of their projects. PhD students face institutional and financial pressures to move rapidly through their programs, limiting the time available to invest in training. Finally, qualitative researchers are many times expected to be brave, take risks, and endure hardship as a prerequisite for doing their job, an attitude which precludes the airing of questions and concerns (Hanson and Richards 2019). Our goal is to contribute to growing debates on these issues, especially given that academia's limitations disproportionately harm marginalized students and faculty (Bonilla-Silva 2017; Brunsma et al. 2017).

As authors, we share a number of characteristics. We all completed our PhDs in the Department of Sociology at The University of Texas at Austin between 2016 and 2018, and were graduate fellows at UT's Urban Ethnography Lab. We all did fieldwork outside of the United States, with dissertations on social movements in Argentina (Pérez), religious minorities in Egypt (Ha), political mobilization and racial politics after disasters in Japan (Shaw), and working mothers in Sweden, Germany, Italy, and the United States (Collins). We each spent an average of twenty months in the field abroad. All of us were fortunate to find tenure-track university appointments within a decade of graduation. There are also differences. Our gender, race, class, sexual identities, and national backgrounds are varied. One of us (Pérez) did research in his home country and first language. Three of us focused on one nation, while another (Collins) did a study of four, one of which was the United States. By discussing some of the logistical difficulties we faced in different stages of research, and outlining what did and did not work from our perspectives, we hope to encourage a dialogue about the diversity of challenges involved in qualitative field methods. In other words, the following is not a to-do list, but an invitation to more openly debate the practical dimensions of our craft, especially (but not exclusively) among early-career scholars.

Table 1. Stages, Challenges, and Lessons of Qualitative Field Research.

Stage	Planning	Accessing	Gathering	Processing
Main challenge	How to maximize the probability of obtaining sufficient high-quality data before starting long-term fieldwork, while minimizing the chance that unexpected events undermine research.	How to access field sites and develop trust with participants, especially when the researcher's personal characteristics highlight outsiderness.	How to gather evidence in a way that is academically efficient, professionally ethical, and personally safe.	How to process data securely and simplify later analysis.
Key lesson	Do as much preliminary fieldwork as possible.	Develop formal and informal local support.	Establish and maintain boundaries.	Expect the processing of data to take as much time as its gathering.

Challenges and Lessons at Four Stages of Research

There are various reasons for deciding to do a profound study of a specific case. They usually involve a combination of factors, such as the personal history of the researcher, the suggestions of advisers, the theoretical implications of the question, a compelling set of empirical puzzles, or simply the timeliness of a particular topic (Gerson and Damaske 2020; Small 2009; Tavory and Timmermans 2009). Whatever the motives, deciding on an object of study is just the start of a lengthy (and frequently variable) process. The tasks involved in doing international fieldwork begin well before researchers leave their home institution and end long after they return.

Consequently, we offer lessons about our experiences in four stages: planning, accessing, gathering, and processing. While the four can be sequential, changes in the landscape of graduate studies have increased the frequency in which they overlap. More and more often, students are doing summer research while applying for funding for future travel, or collecting new evidence at the same time they are processing previously gathered data. We identify these stages because each presents a particular set of challenges, which we summarize in Table 1.

The practical lessons we share are not intended as universal rules. Instead, they are suggestions based on our experiences. The personal and professional circumstances of graduate students are as diverse as their topics and field sites. These lessons worked for us and we think they may work for others, but most importantly, they are conversation starters in the search for a more inclusive, transparent, and impactful profession.

Planning

Qualitative fieldwork entails uncertainty. Researchers have a limited capacity to reshape their field sites in the face of unexpected political and social contingencies. Some of these are specific to a country or a region, such as local unrest or natural disasters. Others, like the COVID-19 pandemic, restrict travel globally. Given this situation, thorough planning is crucial for fieldwork overseas, as it helps students optimize the options available within a set of largely uncontrollable circumstances. As soon as the case study is more or less defined, an overall strategy for collecting data must be developed. The first key decision is when to travel. Schedules can be flexible but should give an idea of when to apply for funding, how much time will be needed for paperwork, and how fieldwork will relate to other requirements of a doctoral program.

Details vary by department and discipline, but the traditional outline of a PhD in qualitative social sciences usually includes several semesters of coursework, followed by comprehensive exams and defending a proposal, before heading off to the field for extensive data collection, and finally, dissertation writing. Based on our experience, this structure is increasingly hard to sustain for those doing research abroad, particularly due to the difficulty of securing enough funding in advance. Therefore, a crucial lesson for all of us was to conduct multiple shorter trips when possible instead of committing from the beginning to one long stint of fieldwork. Doing this, especially during breaks from coursework or teaching, has at least two key advantages: familiarization with the field sites and securing data as "insurance."

Doing a few short trips can prepare students for a later, more extensive period of dissertation fieldwork by learning about the practical skills and logistics associated with a particular case of study. These preliminary research trips would include talking with people, visiting local experts, contacting organizations, or attending relevant events. Data collected in them can sharpen research questions, increase language and cultural proficiency, and test theoretical frameworks and methodological instruments. Preliminary research also prepares students to assess how their positionality affects their interactions with interlocutors. Furthermore, it helps generate findings that inform grant applications and subsequently increase the chances of securing funding. Finally, short trips can help students draft dissertation chapters, offering an early sense of the project's trajectory.

Another benefit of multiple research trips is obtaining data that can serve as "insurance" against obstacles to future research. The more evidence collected early on, even if preliminary, the less will be needed later to complete a dissertation. Importantly, accumulating data at multiple stages of research increases the likelihood that a student will be able to weather any events that may lead to loss of access to the field, such as unexpected political turmoil or opposition by key gatekeepers. Even if the restriction is temporary, data from shorter trips can be used for analysis in the meantime until fieldwork is possible again.

We recognize that international travel can be costly and often requires securing dedicated funding. Multiple shorter international trips to field sites may end up costing more than one long-term trip. However, students can arrange this type of research activity in several ways. University, departmental, or research centers' fellowships are available for brief instances of fieldwork, and they can serve as stepping stones for more competitive funding opportunities. If students have family or relatives living close to field sites, they may use personal visits as opportunities to conduct research in strategic locations. Students can also take advantage of conferences in the country, expanding their stay to include a couple of extra weeks. Language scholarships are another potential source of financial support.

Furthermore, while the value of being physically present in the field is irreplaceable, some of the familiarization with a location can be done remotely. We strongly encourage early engagement with field sites and communities through virtual means as research plans take shape. Digital ethnography has gained greater recognition, especially in the post-COVID era, and offers meaningful opportunities for connection. Online lectures, workshops, and other similar events provide valuable insights into ongoing developments in the field and can help initiate contact with potential interlocutors.

The usefulness of preliminary research became evident in Hyun Jeong Ha's experiences. Her dissertation examined the development of sectarian violence in Egypt, with a particular emphasis on the daily experiences of Copts, the country's largest faith minority. After a visit in 2010, the rest of her fieldwork took place during 2014.

Ha traveled to Cairo for two months during the summer break in 2010, using funds from a departmental pre-dissertation fellowship. During the fieldwork, she identified a new research topic and questions through visits to Coptic Christian churches. Ha's dissertation research, however, ended up relying much more on contingent situations than on her original plans. A few months after her return to the United States, the Arab Spring protests reached Egypt, affecting her plans for additional fieldwork. The massive uprisings across North Africa and the Middle East made it impossible for her to travel.

Amid the uncertainty, Ha was forced to turn her research virtual, following events remotely via media sources and contacts with respondents. Having established a network of friends in Cairo through preliminary fieldwork, she asked them questions about unfolding events, gauging a safer time for making another field trip. In the meantime, she completed her coursework, passed her comprehensive examinations, and prepared a dissertation proposal based on her 2010 research in Cairo. In retrospect, she credits her preliminary research with preparing her for her dissertation, but wishes she had visited Egypt at least one more time before she was finally able to resume fieldwork in January 2014.

In addition to being familiarized with the research site and having clearer ideas about a new project, another takeaway from Ha's experience is the importance of identifying groups who may facilitate or restrict access to the field. As many ethnographers have experienced due to the methodology's invasive and colonial nature (Adjepong 2019; Driscoll and Schuster 2018; Owens 2003), Ha encountered suspicion from potential interlocuters. Some people perceived her either as an intelligence agent sent by the U.S. government or as a Muslim woman collecting information on church activities, despite her openness about being a Protestant Christian. Although Ha knew this would be a possibility, given widespread conspiracy theories about Western countries in Egypt, such false accusations limited her opportunities to talk to some people. Hence, exposing themselves to the field earlier, prior to the long-term research, will assist students in preparing to gain access to the field and understanding its nature.

Ha's preliminary fieldwork also gave her a more nuanced picture of how different dimensions of her identity factored into relationship building with potential research participants. She occasionally encountered challenges in interviewing older Egyptians, in part, she thinks, due to her position as a Korean woman in her early thirties. A few elderly Copts refused, likely due to concerns about the repercussions of discussing sensitive topics. To identify interview participants who might be more receptive, she sought assistance from her friends to approach their parents, who offered previously unarticulated insights.

In contrast, Ha also experienced moments of unexpected openness from younger Egyptian women. During the early stages of her research, when she visited a church in her neighborhood, she was welcomed by women in their twenties and thirties who were enthusiastic about the popular TV shows, films, and music from her native South Korea. They expressed keen interest in her participation in their church events, and all of them agreed to participate in in-depth interviews. Interestingly, one of them was a Korean language major at her college in Cairo, and she ended up helping Ha with her Arabic in return for Korean language lessons. The hospitality of these younger women helped Ha start her interviews and recruit more participants later.

In sum, Ha's early trip to Cairo allowed her to find a new research topic and district to study, familiarize herself with interlocutors, and secure a research grant for her extensive fieldwork a few years later. It also helped her to design her dissertation research in a context of significant unrest. In retrospect, she thinks additional trips could have been of great use, but the one she did was still valuable. Incorporating such trips in the planning does not eliminate the possibility of unexpected obstacles, but reduces the chances that their emergence derails the whole project.

Accessing

Scholars have written a great deal about issues of access in qualitative research, from the ethics and process of gaining entrée into a field site, to building trust and rapport with participants (Brown-Saracino 2014; Browne and McBride 2015; Hoang and Parreñas 2016; Reich 2003, Reyes 2020), and grappling with outsider status (Arendell 1997; Bucerius 2013; Collins 1986; Merton 1970; Schilt and Williams 2008). Certainly, the potential benefits and drawbacks associated with one's social location given the subjects and field site merit careful thought. These thorny issues can be amplified when working abroad (Hoang 2015). One valuable tip in this regard is to get as much local support as possible.

Getting local support has three important benefits, especially when dealing with cultural or language barriers. First, it can generate community. Although fieldwork has its high points, it is also normal to feel overwhelmed, stressed, and lonely in the process. As a result, having colleagues, friends, and neighbors around can be a great help. Developing a sense of belonging may prove valuable professionally (to join an intellectual community and get assistance when problem solving) and personally (by offering emotional support and connection).

Second, local support helps researchers connect to social networks necessary for fieldwork. These ties are particularly important in settings where the scholar's own initial contacts may be limited upon arrival. Getting access to participants and their social worlds often involves being introduced by a common acquaintance. The bigger the network of support developed in the field, the greater the number and type of social milieus that can be used for recruiting. This is key when working with hard-to-reach populations, or for researchers whose positionality vis-à-vis participants generates barriers of distrust.

Finally, local support gives researchers access to people with localized knowledge that they may lack firsthand. Students who are outsiders to a Field site should read up extensively on its norms, culture, politics, and history ahead of time, and enroll in any necessary language classes. In addition to this training, though, nothing can replace the guidance of residents. Even if the scholar is already familiar with a site or case, these people can lend a hand with specific aspects of fieldwork, such as adapting recruitment tactics, refining interview questions, and tweaking observational methods. As data collection is underway, locals may also be willing to discuss emerging findings, suggest other relevant sources, or troubleshoot unexpected difficulties. On the flip side, local experts may also help a researcher decide what to do if they face resistance in accessing a field site, or when to stop pursuing a project altogether.

Developing connections and securing local support are thus crucial components of qualitative field research. One can find these through formal and informal means. Regarding formal support, it may be useful to seek an affiliation with a relevant local institution. In some places, the practice of hosting "visiting researchers" is common. In the United States, these often take the form of competitive paid appointments. In other parts of the world, such as much of Western Europe, Latin America, East Asia and the Middle East, the practice is more commonplace and involves fewer bureaucratic steps, in part because such positions tend to be uncompensated.

After choosing a site and defining a rough window of time for fieldwork, students may look online for local institutions that align with their research plans. This could be a university department, government office, research institute, nonprofit organization, or other intellectual space. The more closely aligned they are with one's interests, the easier it is to make a pitch about the value of a visiting position.

Caitlyn Collins' fieldwork benefited from this type of support. Her dissertation used in-depth interviews and field observations with women in six western European cities, as well as Washington DC, to understand how middle-class mothers navigate employment and caregiving in contexts with different policies and attitudes about gender, work, and family. She conducted fieldwork in each summer break between 2011 and 2015, and over the winter holidays of 2015.

Collins found the four organizations where she secured positions through Google searches. Another good way to identify promising institutions is to comb the curricula vitae of colleagues working in similar substantive areas. Ideally, the visit would be mutually beneficial. The researcher would enjoy the community, networks, and localized knowledge outlined above, while other members of the group would benefit from the researcher's skills and experience. Students may offer to give lectures, provide feedback on writing, help with grant applications, and translate materials. Given that the main advantage of joining a local organization is support for research, it is a good idea to make an effort to get to know other members.

Once the student has identified a place that seems like a suitable fit, with some opportunity for mutual benefit, they can reach out to inquire about the possibility of a temporary affiliation. This may mean emailing, calling, or even showing up in person. In other scenarios, asking a friend, colleague, or mentor for an introduction may be the best option. Collins used two approaches. At three of the four institutes, she first contacted the head of the organization or subunit via email. The communication included a concise personal introduction, the project's potential connection to the organization, and the timeframe involved. At the fourth place, a friend of a colleague made an email introduction on her behalf. In all cases, securing positions required some entrepreneurialism and patience.

There may be some administrative hurdles. The head of the group might ask for more information about the project, documentation like a letter from a dissertation advisor, or proof of Institutional Review Board approval. Some paperwork is expected, especially if the researcher needs keys, an ID card, or access to places and information that are otherwise private. Another requirement may be participating in training or orientation programs.

Of course, an institutional affiliation may not always be a benefit. Researchers need to consider their particular project and the community they want to access. This tactic may not be helpful if the goal is to study populations who have reason to distrust academic organizations, or if a formal local position would cast suspicion about the researcher.

Concerning informal sources of support, one way to go about finding community is by connecting with locals unrelated to the researcher's project. The choice of housing can help in this regard. Living alone during fieldwork certainly has its benefits, but it is often cost prohibitive, and it can be isolating. If possible, students might consider finding a place to stay in a shared apartment, home, or dormitory with one or more people who are locals. This arrangement means having daily conversations with people who know the place well and have a personal association with the field site. This can be useful in countless ways, from navigating public transportation and other logistics, to helping recruit participants and making friends.

Another avenue to make connections is to join clubs, sports teams, or other organizations. One can attend events, take classes, or volunteer. If fieldwork is concentrated in a particular area, living close by or interacting regularly with residents may be a great way to learn more about the place. Researchers may also try to recruit participants who share a particular trait or characteristic. Tactics to meet people belonging to these groups will differ, but informal opportunities to network will likely matter quite a bit.

When Collins conducted research with middle-class working mothers in Sweden, Germany, and Italy, she adopted a number of these approaches to help gain community, connect to wider social networks, and learn from local residents. As a white, middle-class woman from the United States, Collins' identities were similar to her European participants in some ways and different in others. She was neither a mother nor European and was younger than most interviewees. As an outsider, she was assumed to lack familiarity with European public policies, which meant she could ask participants to explain them, lending valuable insight. She gained a sense for how women themselves understood the policies, which was central to answering her research questions.

Given the nature of the project, funding sources, and her progression in the PhD program, Collins usually had about three months to complete all the interviews needed in each European city. Weighing these considerations (which are sure to vary for every researcher), she hit the ground running with recruitment as soon as she arrived, taking into account the visible and invisible tools of her positionality in her ethnographic toolkit which were likely to facilitate relational access in some ways and create barriers in others (Reyes 2020). She addressed this situation in two ways. First, she lived with locals in shared flats. Her roommates were not only sources of emotional support and friendship. By sharing their social capital, they were also key providers of practical support for the project. Second, as mentioned above, Collins secured visiting researcher positions in each field site before arriving: at research organizations in Germany, a sociology department with a relevant research center in Sweden, and a political science department at a university in Italy.

Her coworkers and roommates were invaluable in recruiting interview participants. They went far out of their way time and again to tap into their social networks to spread the word about Collins' project. They also helped her deepen her knowledge of the local history, politics, and culture, and served as local sounding boards for developing ideas. Often, she would arrive to the office or return home and chat with others about what she learned from recent interviewees, bouncing thoughts around and asking for more context and clarity (not all researchers may want a sounding board like this, of course).

Like all of us, Collins also benefited from spending time informally before and after interviews with participants. She considered this activity a form of field observation. Sometimes this meant chatting over a meal at a café or in a home where an interview took place; sitting together at a woman's kitchen table or in their backyard with their partner, children, and friends; taking a tour of their workplace; going for a walk around their neighborhood; or enjoying the sunshine together on a park bench. Developing deeper personal connections with interviewees led to further local support, both personally and professionally. Sometimes this informal time with participants generated more research opportunities—what Margarethe Kusenbach (2003) calls "street phenomenology" (see also Peters et al. 2018). For instance, visiting a neighborhood playground with a mother and her toddler was not only fun, but also gave her a window into the woman's daily routines, and other mothers stopped by to chat during the outing. This opened the door to inquiries about interviews.

In sum, securing local support is a great way for early-career scholars to develop community, gain access to new networks, and get assistance from people with localized knowledge. It can also enhance well-being and make life more enjoyable. Whether through formal or informal means, having on-the-ground support can help personally and professionally during international fieldwork, as well as in the years to follow.

Gathering

By definition, qualitative field research is boundary work—an epistemological practice wherein researchers must define and negotiate the limits of their field (Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Sprague 2016). Yet as academia's professional expectations continue to climb, graduate students are sometimes placed in situations where their personal boundaries and needs are secondary to the metrics of scholarly productivity (Denise and Louis 2024; Reyes 2020). Even for methodologies rooted in interpretation and reflexivity like ours, scholars have felt the pressure to position their research in quantifiable terms: maximize number of interviews, months in the field, and publications. The authors of this article are under no illusions that our universities will suddenly become more reasonable or humane as far as "what counts" as professional success. But it is also important to reject the perpetuation of harmful practices simply because they have operated as professional norms for so long. A good starting point is the affirmation of graduate students' right to determine their own boundaries within their fieldwork experiences.

Fieldwork is an embodied methodology (Cerulo 2015; Robinson 2022; Wacquant 2015) and social inequalities shape how researchers move through and make meaning within their respective field sites. Being open about how researchers' bodies influence their craft (Adjepong 2019; Hanson and Richards 2019) can help the social sciences divest from norms that ignore racism, sexism, classism, and ableism in service of an "ideal" researcher. Feminist authors remind us to grapple with the asymmetrical risks and costs of fieldwork for marginalized scholars (Davis and Craven 2016, Hanson and Richards 2019; Meadow 2017). As Hoang (2015) illustrates, ethnography conducted from positions of vulnerability can help researchers perceive relations of power within their field sites and amid macrolevel structures of inequality. Taking boundaries seriously as a legitimate intellectual practice can enrich early-career scholars' reflexivity about their research projects while helping them develop more sustainable fieldwork practices.

A first step toward addressing this problem is to see boundaries as important tools that can help orient researchers to become cognizant of the idiosyncratic nature of qualitative research. Available time, types of sites and communities, researcher personality, and other considerations factor heavily into how scholars enter and define the field—as well as how they improvise once in it (Reyes 2020). Although examples of previous work can offer useful templates, it is imperative for early career researchers to develop strategies that address the unique demands of their projects, their social locations, and their personal values. A research project carried out over two months, for instance, might require a very different strategy for immersion, relationship building, and scheduling than a project that involves multiple years of data collection. Experienced academic writers are already quite familiar with the genre of writing about the limitations of our research in journal articles and grant applications. We encourage graduate students and faculty mentors to revisit such themes beyond perfunctory reference, to meaningfully consider what analytical strengths emerge from our limitations. Such practices can help graduate students evaluate the quality of their data collection, rather than uncritically adopt a norm of "more is better."

Vivian Shaw's research in Japan demonstrates how boundaries that may at first feel limiting can ultimately reveal important ethnographic insights. Her dissertation explored the emergence of activist networks in the aftermath of the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster, focusing on antinuclear and anti-racist social movements. She conducted her fieldwork, which included participant observations and interviews, over a total of thirty-six months between 2015 and 2018. After a six-month period of preliminary research and language training in another part of the country, she arrived in Tokyo in September 2015 with plans to live in the city for more than a year. Thanks to multiple external grants and fellowships, she had a large amount of time available to engage in data collection. Yet the privilege of ample time ironically exacerbated her feelings of being unmoored and isolated. Four years prior, Shaw had left an abusive relationship. She had worked hard to progress through her doctoral program and develop her research, but continued to experience stalking and harassment. Entering the field required her to spend significant time away from key sources of social support and to cultivate relationships with many unknown personalities. She felt vulnerable. But perhaps more acutely, she feared that her sense of vulnerability would prevent her from accomplishing the work she had set out to do.

Acclimating to life in the field was also a logistical endeavor. In Japan, foreigners typically must pay large fees to guarantor companies in order to be eligible for a rental lease. Appliances that might be standard in other countries, such as a refrigerator or a cooktop, are usually not included with apartment rentals. Obtaining a phone number that is compatible with the Japanese phone system (vs. an “internet only” number that has restricted calling abilities) requires additional documentation, such as a visa, a long-term address, and a bank account. With Japan still a very paper-based society, completing such tasks often require in-person transactions, encumbering efforts at advanced planning.

Shaw had found her apartment prior to her arrival through a Japanese studies professional listserv. The landlord was himself a Japanese academic and had advertised his apartments on the listserv for many years—allowing generations of foreign researchers to bypass the typical administrative hurdles of the Tokyo real estate market. Shaw settled into her slightly pricey, 250-square foot, semi-furnished apartment that at least came with a refrigerator and an electric hot plate. The first few weeks passed by with activities like buying a bed and setting up her electricity billing. When she finally attended her first antinuclear rally in early October, Shaw was worried that she had already wasted too much time.

Although time was precious for her fieldwork, endurance was also crucial. Shaw’s fieldwork followed a decentralized community of people—she could not tether herself to a single organization or place. She searched for the rhythm of activist events and soon found herself operating on a nocturnal schedule. The vast majority of activists had full-time jobs and attended rallies in the evening after work and on weekends. On the days she was in the field, Shaw would return to her apartment close to midnight, eat a late dinner, write field notes, and finally go to bed around two or three in the morning. Despite feeling tired by these late nights, she felt amateurish compared to peers who seemed to be clocking more hours at their field sites.

Shaw (over)compensated by scouring mailing lists and newsletters for any public events even tangentially related to antinuclear and antidiscrimination community organizing, developing connections with up to 30 organizations. These were valuable learning experiences, but a few months into the fieldwork, Shaw was undergoing what the four of us each felt at one point or another: a combination of overextension and exhaustion, on the one hand, and concern over not going “deep enough” on the other. She questioned if the quantity of events she attended translated to the quality of data she needed. Shaw made the difficult decision to focus on a much smaller subset of groups. This shift required her to “exit” some of the relationships she had initiated in prior months, a process steeped in complicated social and political implications.

As Shaw explored different directions and methods, she continued to reflect on her physical and emotional needs and limits. Preserving her mental health and personal safety were values of importance to her. Shaw realized that her position as a young Asian American woman working in a conservative East Asian country required her to navigate a set of vulnerabilities that differed from other graduate researchers, particularly those who were white men. More than one encouraged her to drink heavily with research participants as a path toward "getting the good stuff." Shaw was fortunate to have advisors who were understanding about her personal history and sympathetic to her concerns. It helped that both of her advisors were ethnographers, one of them a feminist scholar who had conducted research on intimate partner violence. As they encouraged her to follow a pace of work that fit within her boundaries, Shaw found more space to process the nuances of how activists established relationships—with researchers and with each other. She eventually became friends with a photographer involved with the anti-racism movement who had grown up in the United States and shared interests in U.S. culture. He began to convince other members of the community to agree to interviews. While ostensibly open to newcomers, this community valued when a new person had the backing of an experienced activist who was willing to accept responsibility should they do something that violated the expectations of the group.

Shaw's standpoint also gave her a view into the asymmetries of power and vulnerability that structured the lives of different activists. As she found herself leaving events around 10 pm, rather than staying for rounds of late-night drinking, she began noticing that activist women were doing the same. These women were not negotiating their boundaries in relation to a research project, but nonetheless experienced a conflict between the demands of activism and their own self-preservation. Their strategies of self-protection also reflected their years of navigating misogyny in all parts of their lives—from schooling, to the workplace, to familial relationships. Shaw eventually learned that sexual harassment was a key concern for women in the movement, which had been marred by several serious incidents. This pattern offered a key finding about gender politics within these social movement communities and a reminder that research participants also have boundaries they must negotiate.

New researchers frequently judge themselves harshly for feeling "lost" while gathering data, yet the collection of evidence does not proceed in easily quantifiable, mechanical steps. Research is, as Rosales (2020) puts it, an "iterative process" replete with mistakes, dead ends, and unexpected opportunities, requiring a substantial amount of improvisation along the way (Becker 2009; Taylor 2014). If we give ourselves intellectual and emotional space to sit with our discomfort, we can better understand the generative potential of feeling lost—especially as we navigate relationships within the field. Getting used to this type of work takes patience, yet the professional environment in which students are immersed is not always conducive to this approach. Different scholars will have comfort levels across a range of emotional and physical demands within the field. Similarly, their levels of security and rapport vary by subject and evolve over time (Rosales 2020).

Ultimately, rather than assuming a one-size-fits-all approach to fieldwork, we encourage students to reflect proactively on their personal needs and boundaries, particularly around safety, social support, and mental health. For instance, a student who takes certain medications can look into the healthcare system of the country where they will be undertaking fieldwork, research the steps involved with filling prescriptions, and familiarize themselves with any potential legal prohibitions on such medication. Students with significant others, children, or other close family members might budget time in advance to regularly connect with loved ones. Others may need to figure out the logistics of telehealth therapy in a new time zone. Shifting the norms of fieldwork, moreover, cannot rely solely on students' investments in their own self-care. Faculty mentors and senior scholars must interrogate their own assumptions about doing fieldwork and reflect on how they can adjust their professional guidance to cultivate more humane research. They can communicate about their expectations for checking in and their capacities to offer support while the student is in the field. Faculty, moreover, can be transparent about their own limitations and model healthy boundaries alongside insightful, novel, and compelling work.

Processing

The gathering of data is never the end of fieldwork. First, information may need to be backed up (using storage devices or cloud services) in a manner consistent with Institutional Review Board requirements. Second, and most importantly, evidence must be processed into a format that allows for regular review. This step can take as much time and effort as collection itself, and it plays a central role in ensuring a more efficient analysis and writing later on. For advanced graduate students under pressure to finish a high-quality dissertation and publish findings, this too-often downplayed phase thus becomes crucial.

In general, the most demanding aspect of this processing stage (while still on the field) consists of writing field notes and transcribing audio files. Data gathering can take a large amount of time. Yet for each hour of interviews and observations, many more need to be devoted to preparing the data for analysis. This situation can easily lead to backlogs, risking the loss of precious insight. Fortunately, there are ways to address this dilemma (although, like many other challenges of fieldwork, it cannot be entirely solved). For field notes, the key is rescheduling the task of writing without reducing the capacity to recall details. For interviews, the goal is to reduce the time devoted to transcription.

There is consensus among scholars about the basic guidelines for taking field notes (Babbie 2005; Emerson et al. 1995; Lofland and Lofland 1995; Warren and Karner 2010). First, the temporal separation between observation and writing ought to be minimal: researchers should try to complete their notes right after returning from the field site for the day, or as soon as basic needs allow it. Second, substantial, uninterrupted time must be exclusively devoted to writing notes so they can include rich details (a typical rule of thumb is one hour of writing per hour of observation, yet different ethnographers use diverse ratios).

Although these principles are logical in theory, they are almost impossible to enact in practice. First, they are extremely time consuming, even for scholars who have a regular schedule of participant observation. For example, a researcher might spend six hours in a field site per day, five days a week, and a similar amount of time writing as observing. These activities result in sixty hours of work weekly, not counting transportation, other professional obligations, or the errands common in international research (from language classes to visa paperwork). Second, producing notes does not mean simply documenting events: it is a work of analysis in its own right (Emerson et al. 1995; Luker 2008). Hence, the level of concentration essential for generating perceptive, detailed accounts is sometimes difficult to achieve and maintain. It may be possible to overcome these challenges for short periods of fieldwork (a few weeks or months). However, this strategy can quickly lead to burnout and undermine the quality of the data. An exhausted ethnographer is less capable of noticing patterns in the evidence, identifying research opportunities, and developing meaningful relations with participants. Researchers should aim for a consistent development of analytical insight rather than trying to log every single element of what happened in the field (Calarco 2018).

To be fair, scholars usually acknowledge this issue and offer practical solutions. However, these tend to be framed in two ways that do not reflect the experiences of many dissertation-stage students. First, they are described as last-resource tools. Yet even under ideal conditions (i.e., regular schedules, short travel times, availability of down time) accumulations of unfinished notes can occur. Second, many times these suggestions aim to reduce the overall time involved in completing notes. There are practical ways to reach this objective (Calarco 2018; Lareau 2021; Warren and Karner 2010). Photographs, videos, and maps may replace lengthy descriptions of scenes and locations. Developing a system of abbreviations increases the speed of note-taking (see Reyes 2018). However, these are only partial remedies. A more effective goal is to shift part of the work for later without compromising the accuracy of the account and the quality of the analysis.

From our experience, audio recording field notes is a possible way to ensure a manageable schedule and avoid backlogs leading to the loss of data. After returning from the field, researchers can go to a quiet place and narrate their experiences with an audio recorder in hand, aiming to include relevant events and impressions. A few days later, when more time is available, they can transcribe the audio file. If any new ideas pop up, they can be included in clearly marked addenda.

It is important to note that using recordings does not necessarily reduce the time involved in producing field notes; it just allows the scholar to reschedule part of the task. This generates flexibility. First, because fieldwork often involves involuntary down time, these moments can be used to transcribe notes. Second, recording allows the researcher to regularly devote separate time to completing field notes, helping reduce anxiety and facilitating ongoing observations. Third, while the amount of overall hours required may remain the same, the proportion of time that needs to be high quality is reduced, as intense concentration is only essential during recording. Finally, this method is customizable: researchers can use it to different degrees or during specific portions of fieldwork.

In-depth interviews entail their own set of challenges. When circumstances permit it, audio recording has the great advantage of allowing the researcher to focus on the conversation without having to take notes at the same time. However, the contents eventually need to be typed out. Even assuming high sound quality, no ambient noises, and limited language issues, it can take four to six hours for a seasoned transcriber to turn one hour of audio into text. Multiply that by dozens of interviews and the task can easily take months. This may not be a big deal for more experienced scholars, but it is a major issue for graduate students trying to complete their doctorate and share their scholarship in a timely manner.

Consequently, students beginning a qualitative project should devise a strategy to process interviews from the beginning of fieldwork. This involves having an open conversation with advisers about methodological priorities, and considering the inclusion of funds for transcription services in grant applications. Its importance may seem minor compared to travel expenses, but it can free up substantial time, especially for PhD candidates in the final stretch of their programs. If feasible, hiring transcription services from local professionals is a great idea, as they are more likely to be attuned to the idiosyncrasies of the field site's culture and language.

Unfortunately, many graduate students operate on a very limited budget, so they need different solutions. This can be achieved by enhancing transcription skills and strategizing initial analysis. Transcribing is different for each person: some are able to concentrate and complete the task quickly, whereas others find the work tedious and cumbersome. The characteristics of fieldwork also matter: some students have plenty of downtime that can be used to transcribe, whereas others are unable to devote any time to it while in the field. Some projects entail fewer and shorter conversations, while others involve speaking with many participants for long hours. Finally, the language of interviews can be an advantage or obstacle depending on the researcher's background and training.

Regardless of differences, there are some common tips. If possible, researchers should choose locations for interviews with limited ambient noise: recording should take place inside, with no music or TVs on, and as few people talking as possible. Group interviews take longer to transcribe, and there is always the risk of misattributing quotes. Transcription should take place in a low-distraction environment. Investing in software (speech recognition and dictation programs) and devices (from high-fidelity stereo recorders to transcription pedals) is a clever way to reduce time. Universities may make some of these resources available, or faculty may be convinced to purchase them as department property.

In addition, while in the long run a complete transcription is ideal (and should remain the objective for scholars with more resources), graduate students can be strategic in their analyses, focusing on the components of the interviews most relevant to them. This is not a justification for glossing over important data or ignoring contradicting evidence. It simply means that the areas of an interview identified as less pertinent to a particular project do not need to be transcribed in the short term. The most practical way to do this is to listen to each recording carefully while taking notes, identifying trends, outlining the most relevant findings, and pointing to specific segments for further examination and detailed transcription (Babbie 2005; Lofland and Lofland 1995; Warren and Karner 2010; Weiss 1994). These notes are a shareable chronicle of the analysis, so copies of all versions should be saved in a separate folder.

Of course, many of the practical challenges and solutions associated with processing qualitative data are common to researchers regardless of which country they study. That being said, international fieldwork adds its own complications. In particular, the higher probability of cultural and linguistic differences increases the need for translation and contextualization, both internally (for the analyst's own records) and externally (for potential audiences). When the content of interviews has to be translated (at least partially) and field notes end up including a larger portion of clarifications, an additional task is added to an already burdened fieldworker.

Marcos Pérez experienced these challenges in his research on the unemployed workers' movement in Argentina. His dissertation used participant observation and life-story interviews to explore why activists from nine different organizations followed different trajectories after recruitment, with a special focus on the role of routines while mobilized. He collected data in the northern summers of 2011, 2012, and 2013, with a yearlong period of fieldwork starting December 2013.

Pérez did research in his hometown and in his native language, which simplified his familiarization with the case of study and made interviews easier. However, given that his field sites were located in different points of the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires, a typical day included leaving early in the morning, traveling for a few hours, and conducting observations and interviews. After returning in the afternoon, Pérez sat down for hours to record the day's experiences, a task that could not wait because in most cases the cycle started again the following morning. In the field, interactions with others allowed him to stay engaged. However, alone in front of a computer screen at night, concentration was much more difficult. Coupled with the other inevitable requirements of academic life, this led to sixteen-hour workdays and busy weekends, which caused significant strain. During periods of preliminary fieldwork, Pérez was able to maintain this pace. However, when the final, longer phase of fieldwork began, this became unsustainable. He learned the hard way that a drained and overwhelmed ethnographer is less healthy and productive.

The solution was audio recording field notes. During particularly busy periods, Pérez would dictate his notes to a recorder instead of writing them in a computer. The sound files were ready for typing whenever time became available. This, however, did not solve the problem of interview transcription, especially because (like for all of us) significant portions of his conversations needed to be translated into English for his dissertation. Halfway through the project Pérez obtained a grant that allowed him to hire local assistants, but by that time he had processed fifty interviews, many of which had low sound quality because they were recorded outdoors. This caused the work to extend long after returning to the United States. A pedal bought by the department simplified things, but the task was still arduous. Without transcriptionists for the remaining interviews, dissertation writing would have started at least a semester later than it did.

In sum, processing raw evidence is a step that tends to be overlooked, but it can take as much time and effort as the collection of data itself. Therefore, an efficiently organized, strategically oriented initial analysis of the data can make a big difference in the last stages of a doctoral program.

Conclusion

Qualitative field research can be a profoundly rewarding methodology. At the same time, it is one of the most demanding tasks graduate school can pose. Some students face the challenge with appropriate institutional and personal support, but others lack these resources. Moreover, the academic profession tends to reward strategies of data collection that are harmful for early-career scholars. The burden of securing funds, gathering evidence, and writing publications can lead students to sacrifice their own well-being on the altar of productivity. Such an attitude may yield immediate results, but it is important to remember that the marginal returns of pushing one's limits (laudable as doing so may be) decline rapidly past a certain point.

In this article, we have tried to address one of the aspects of this problem: the frequent lack of an open discussion about the practicalities of doing qualitative fieldwork. We focus on international research, the type of work that we do and enjoy, to outline lessons we learned as graduate students. Of course, the generalizability of our experiences is complex: many of our arguments also apply to domestic fieldwork, and the circumstances involved in international research are extremely varied. However, scholars have much to gain by sharing their stories with others, because our craft is inseparable from the kind of evidence it produces.

To structure these conversations, we suggested dividing the task of fieldwork into four stages: planning, accessing, gathering, and processing. This categorization does not simply reflect the temporal progression of a project, because changes in the realities of graduate programs have generated substantial overlap between different steps (e.g., all of us spent some time in the field planning future trips to gather additional data). Instead, the main criteria behind the identification of the four is the existence of a set of challenges specific to each of them: increasing the chances of obtaining high-quality evidence, developing trust while navigating the insider/outsider balance, protecting the well-being of everyone involved, and simplifying the analysis of collected data.

We understand that colleagues may disagree with some of these suggestions, and we welcome their thoughts. Our goal is to generate a conversation among students and their mentors on the realities of doing international field research. By sharing different views about how to tackle the challenges of this type of work, our discipline can increase the chances of success for those who are just getting started.

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