

Field Research: A Graduate Student's Guide¹

Ezgi Irgil, *Göteborgs Universitet*

Anne-Kathrin Kreft, *Göteborgs Universitet*

Myunghye Lee, *University of Missouri–Columbia*

Charmaine N. Willis, *University at Albany, State University of New York*

Kelebogile Zvobgo, *William & Mary*

ABSTRACT: What is field research? Is it just for qualitative scholars? Must it be done in a foreign country? How much time in the field is “enough”? A lack of disciplinary consensus on what constitutes “field research” or “fieldwork” has left graduate students in political science under-informed and thus under-equipped to leverage site-intensive research to address issues of interest and urgency across the subfields. Uneven training in doctoral programs has also left early-career researchers under-prepared for the logistics of fieldwork – from developing networks and effective sampling strategies to building respondents’ trust – and related issues of funding, physical safety, mental health, research ethics, and crisis response. Based on the experience of five junior scholars, this article offers answers to crucial questions that graduate students puzzle over, often without the benefit of others’ “lessons learned.” This practical guide engages theory and praxis, in support of an epistemologically and methodologically pluralistic discipline.

¹ We gratefully acknowledge research support from the Southeast Asia Research Group (Pre-Dissertation Fellowship), University at Albany (Initiatives for Women and the Benevolent Association), University of Missouri (the John D. Bies International Travel Award Program and the Kinder Institute on Constitutional Democracy), University of Southern California (Provost Fellowship in the Social Sciences), Vetenskapsrådet (Diariumnummer 2019-06298), Wilhelm och Martina Lundgrens Vetenskapsfond (2018-2272), and William & Mary (Global Research Institute Pre-doctoral Fellowship). In addition, this material is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship Program under Grant No. DGE-1418060, Forskraftstiftelsen Theodor Adelswårds Minne, Knut and Alice Wallenberg Foundation (KAW 2013.0178). Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation. Authors are listed alphabetically. All authors contributed equally.

Introduction

A novel virus races around the globe, triggering an international health crisis and forcing doctoral candidates to cut short their time abroad. Graduate students stress over how they will now collect crucial data for their dissertations. While the challenges posed by COVID-19 are new, the concerns about data collection in the field are not. Early-career researchers typically worry about the logistics of fieldwork, they wonder what “counts” and what does not, and they puzzle over how to make the most of their limited time and financial resources.

We are five political scientists interested in providing graduate students resources for field research that we lacked when we first began our work. Each of us has recently completed or will soon complete a Ph.D. at a U.S. or European university, though we are from different national backgrounds. We have conducted field research in our home countries and abroad. From Colombia and Guatemala to the United States, from Europe to Turkey, and throughout East and Southeast Asia, we have spanned the globe to investigate civil society activism and transitional justice in post-violence societies, conflict-related sexual violence, social movements, authoritarianism and contentious politics, and everyday politics involving refugees and host-country citizens.

While some of us have studied in departments that offer extensive training in qualitative and field research methods, others of us have had to self-teach, learning through trial and error. Others among us have been fortunate to participate in short courses and workshops hosted by university consortia such as the Consortium for Qualitative Research Methods (CQRM) and the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO).

We have spent as little as ten days in-country or as much as several months, visiting a given field site location just once or many times. Sometimes, we have been able to plan weeks and months in advance. Other times, we have quickly arranged focus groups and impromptu interviews. Other times still, we have completed interviews virtually, when research participants were in remote locations. We have worked in countries where we are fluent or have professional proficiency in the language, and in countries where we have relied on translators. We have worked in settings with precarious security as well as in settings that feel as comfortable as home.

We have conducted interviews, focus groups, and ethnographies with diplomats, bureaucrats, military personnel, ex-combatants, civil society advocates, survivors of political violence, refugees, and host-country citizens. We have grappled with ethical dilemmas, chief among them how to get useful data for our research projects in ways that exceed the minimal standards of human subjects research evaluation panels. Relatedly, we have contemplated how to use our platforms to give back to the individuals and communities who have so generously lent us their time and knowledge, and shared with us their personal and sometimes harrowing stories.

This article offers answers to crucial questions that graduate students puzzle over, often without the benefit of others' "lessons learned." We focus on four general areas. First: *What is field research?* Is it just for qualitative scholars? Must it be conducted in a foreign country? How much time in the field is "enough"? Second: *What are the nuts and bolts?* How does one get ready? How can one optimize limited time and financial resources? Third: *How does one conduct fieldwork safely?* What should a researcher do to keep herself, research assistants, and research subjects safe? What measures should he take to protect his mental health? Fourth: *How does one conduct ethical, beneficent field research?* This guide engages theory and praxis, in support of an epistemologically and methodologically pluralistic discipline.

What is fieldwork?

We have found that the concept of "fieldwork" is not well-defined in political science. Defining field research is vital because notions of what it is and is not underpin any suggestions for conducting it. Acknowledging the increasing epistemological and methodological pluralism in political science, and the many benefits of conducting research in the field, we argue for an inclusive definition of "fieldwork" such as Kapiszewski et al.'s (2015): "leaving one's home institution in order to acquire data, information, or insights that significantly inform one's research" (1). Below, we discuss three areas of current disagreement about what fieldwork is, including the purpose of fieldwork, where it occurs, and how long it should be.

First, we find that many in the discipline suppose that fieldwork is typically for qualitative research, whether interpretivist or positivist. However, as scholars increasingly demonstrate, quantitative projects can benefit from fieldwork, which provides context and supports triangulation. Researchers can also find quantifiable data in the field that is otherwise unavailable (Read 2006; Chambers-Ju 2014; Jensius 2014). Accordingly, fieldwork is not in the domain of any particular epistemology or methodology.

Second, comparative politics and international relations scholars often opine that fieldwork requires leaving the country. We propose, instead, that what matters most is the nature of the project, not the locale. For instance, some of us have interviewed representatives of intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), whose headquarters are generally located in Global North countries. For someone studying in the United States and writing on transnational advocacy networks, interviews with INGO representatives in New York certainly count as fieldwork. Similarly, a graduate student who returns to her home country to interview refugees and native citizens is conducting a field study as much as the next foreign researcher. In sum, scholars should count any site-intensive research as “fieldwork.”

Third, there is a tendency, especially among comparativists, to only count fieldwork that spans the better part of a year; even “surgical strike” research entails one to three months, according to some scholars (Ortbals and Rincker 2009; Weiss et al. 2017). However, we suggest that the appropriate amount of time in the field should be assessed on a project-by-project basis. Some studies require the researcher to be in the field for long periods of time. For example, Willis’s research on discourse around the U.S.’ military presence in overseas host communities has required months in the field. But, as another example, Kreft only needed 10 days in New York to carry out interviews with diplomats and United Nations staff, in a context with which she already had some familiarity from a prior internship.

It is important to recognize a neglected topic in these discussions: costs. Fieldwork that entails months- or years-long research can be prohibitive – something gatekeepers must consider when evaluating “what counts” and “what is enough.” Unlike their predecessors, many graduate students

today have a significant amount of debt and little savings.² For those who work a second or third job, or who are parents and caregivers, going into the field for long stretches is infeasible. As we elaborate in the next section, scholars should think carefully about their project goals, the data required to meet those goals, and the requisite time to attain them.

Field research logistics

A central concern for graduate students, especially those working with a small budget and limited time, is how to optimize time in the field and how to integrate remote work. We offer three pieces of advice: have a plan, build in flexibility, and be strategic, focusing only on collecting data that are unavailable at home.

First, it is important to prepare for the field as much as possible. What kind of preparations do researchers need? For someone conducting interviews with NGO representatives, this might involve identifying the largest-possible pool of potential respondents, securing their contact information, sending them study invitation letters, finding a mutually agreeable time to meet, and pulling together short biographies for each interviewee in order to use your time together most effectively. If you plan to conduct interviews, you should reach out to potential respondents roughly four to six weeks prior to your travel. For individuals who do not respond, you can follow up one to two weeks before you arrive and, if needed, once more when you are there. In addition, if you are conducting research in a country where you have less-than professional fluency in the language, pre-fieldwork planning should include hiring a translator or research assistant, for example, through an online hiring platform like Upwork, or through a local university, or through your national embassy, which often provides lists of individuals it has previously contracted. Also, depending on the research agenda, researchers may visit national archives, local government offices, universities, etc. Before visiting, researchers should contact these facilities and make sure the materials that you need are accessible. For example, Lee visited the Ronald

² There is great variation in graduate students' financial situations, even in the Global North. For example, while higher education is tax-funded in most countries in Europe and Ph.D. students in countries such as Sweden, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Switzerland receive a comparatively generous salary, many graduate students in the U.S. have to pay high enrollment fees and Ph.D. stipends leave many struggling financially.

Reagan Presidential Library Archives to find the U.S.'s strategic evaluations on South Korea's dictator in the 1980s. Before her visit, she contacted librarians in the archives, telling them her visit plans and her research purpose. Librarians made suggestions on which categories she should start to review based on her research goal, and thus she was able to make a list of categories of the materials she needed, saving her a lot of her time.

Second, because plans can and often do change in the field, researchers need to also be flexible. You may meet people you did not make appointments with, come across opportunities you did not expect, or stumble upon new ideas about collecting data in the field. These happenings will enrich your field experience and will ultimately be beneficial for your research. Similarly, researchers should not be discouraged by interviews that do not go according to plan; they present an opportunity to pursue relevant people who can provide an alternative path to your work. Note that planning ahead does not preclude fortuitous encounters or epiphanies. Rather, it provides a structure for them to happen.

You will also be able to recruit more interviewees once you are in the field. In fact, you may have greater success in-country; not everyone is willing to respond to a cold email from an unknown researcher in a foreign country. In Irgil's fieldwork, she contacted store owners that are known in the area and who know the community. This eased her process of introduction into the community and recruiting interviewees. For Zvobgo, she had fewer than a dozen interviews scheduled when she travelled to Guatemala to study civil society activism and transitional justice since the internal armed conflict. But, she was able to recruit additional participants in-country. Interviewees with whom she built a rapport connected her to other NGOs, government offices, and the United Nations country office, sometimes even making the call for her. Through snowball sampling, she was able to triple the number of participants. We should note that conducting interviews is very taxing – especially when opportunities multiply, as in Zvobgo's case. Depending on the project, each interview can take an hour, if not two or more. Hence, you should make a reasonable schedule: we recommend no more than two interviews per day. You do not want to have to cut off an interview because you need to rush to another one. And remember to eat, stay hydrated, and try to get enough sleep.

Third, be strategic. It is important to distinguish between things that can only be done in the field and things that you can accomplish later. Prioritize the former over the latter. Lee's fieldwork experience serves as a good example. She studies a conservative protest movement called the *Taegeukgi Rally* in South Korea. She planned to conduct interviews with the rally participants to examine their motivations for participating. But she only had one month in South Korea. So, she focused on things that could only be done in the field – she went to the rally sites; she observed how protests proceeded, which tactics and chants were used; and she met participants and had some casual conversations with them. Then, she used the contacts she made while attending the rallies to create a social network to solicit interviews from ordinary protesters, her target population. She was able to recruit 25 interviewees through good rapport with the people she met. The actual interviews proceeded via phone after she returned to the U.S. In a nutshell, we advise you to not be obsessed with finishing interviews in the field. Sometimes, it is more beneficial to use your time in the field to build relationships and networks.

Physical safety

Researchers may carry out fieldwork in a country that is considerably less safe than what they are used to, affected by conflict violence or high crime rates. This requires adjusting their everyday routines and habits, restricting their movements temporally and spatially. Feelings of insecurity can be further compounded by linguistic barriers and being far away from friends and family. But there are several measures researchers can take prior to and during fieldwork. Apart from making sure that supervisors and university administrators have the researcher's contact information in the field (and possibly that of a local contact person), researchers can register with their country's embassy or foreign office and any crisis monitoring and prevention systems it has in place. That way, they will be informed of unfolding emergencies and the authorities have a record of them being in the country.

It may also be advisable to set up more individualized protocols with your supervisors. Kreft e.g. made arrangements to be in touch via email at regular intervals to report on progress and wellbeing. This kept her supervisors in the loop, while an interruption in communication would have alerted them early if something were wrong. In addition, Kreft announced planned trips to other parts of the country and

granted her supervisors emergency reading access to her digital calendar. It may also be advisable to put in place an emergency plan, i.e. choose emergency contacts back home and “in the field,” know whom to contact if something happens, and know how to get to the nearest hospital or clinic.

We would be remiss if we did not mention that, when in an unfamiliar context, one’s safety radar may be misguided, so it is important to listen to people who know the context. For example, locals can give advice on which means of transport are safe and which are not, a question that is of utmost importance when traveling to appointments. It is also prudent to heed the safety recommendations and travel advisories provided by state authorities and embassies to determine when and where it is safe to travel. Especially if researchers have responsibility not only for themselves but also for research assistants and research participants, safety must be a top priority. And, of course, one should always be aware of one’s surroundings and use common sense. If something feels unsafe, chances are it is.

Mental health and well-being

Fieldwork may negatively affect the researcher’s mental well-being, whether related to concerns about crime and insecurity, linguistic barriers, social isolation, or the practicalities of identifying, contacting and interviewing research participants. Coping with these different sources of stress can be both mentally and physically exhausting. Then there are the things you may hear, see and learn during your research itself, such as gruesome accounts of violence and suffering. Kreft and Zvobgo have spoken with women victims of conflict-related sexual violence, who sometimes displayed strong emotions of pain and anger during the interviews. Likewise, Irgil and Willis have spoken with members of other vulnerable populations such as refugees and former sex workers.

Although some prior accounts (Wood, 2006; Skjelsbæk, 2018; Williamson et al., 2020) show that it is natural for sensitive research and challenges to affect the researcher, mental well-being is rarely a part of fieldwork courses and guidelines. But even if you know to anticipate *some* sort of reaction, you rarely ever know what that reaction will look like until you experience it. Reactions can include sadness, frustration, anger, fear, helplessness and flashbacks to personal experiences of violence (Williamson et al., 2020). For example, Kreft responded with feelings of depression and both mental and physical

exhaustion. But curiously, these reactions emerged most strongly after she had returned from fieldwork and in particular as she was analyzing her interview data. Fieldwork does not end when one returns home. Likewise, Zvobgo was physically and mentally drained upon her return from the field. Both Kreft and Zvobgo were unable to concentrate for long periods of time and experienced lower-than-normal levels of productivity for weeks afterward.

Our first piece of advice in light of this is to be patient and generous with oneself. Negative effects on the researcher's mental well-being can hit in unexpected ways and at unexpected times. Even if you think that certain reactions are disproportionate or unwarranted, they may simply have been building up over a long time. They are legitimate. Second, investing in social relations is important. Before going on fieldwork, researchers may want to consult others who have done it before them. In the field, seeking the company of locals and of other researchers who are also doing fieldwork alleviates anxiety and makes fieldwork more enjoyable. Third, after the fieldwork trip, researchers will benefit from reaching out to colleagues, especially if they are struggling with readjustment. Exchanging experiences and advice with peers can be extremely beneficial. And even when there are no precise solutions to be found, it is comforting to meet others who are in the same boat and who face many of the same struggles. Realize that certain challenges are part of the fieldwork experience, and that they do not result from inadequacy on the part of the researcher.

Ethical considerations

Interacting with people in the field is one of the most challenging yet rewarding parts of the work that we do, especially in comparison to impersonal, often tedious wrangling and analysis of quantitative data. Field researchers often make personal connections with their interviewees. Consequently, maintaining boundaries can be a bit tricky. Here, we recommend being honest with everyone with whom you interact without overstating the abilities of a researcher. This appears as a challenge in the field, particularly when you empathise with people and when they share profound parts of their lives with you for your research. For instance, when Irgil interviewed native citizens about the changes in their neighbourhood following the arrival of Syrian refugees, many interviewees questioned what she would offer them in return for

their participation. Irgil responded that her main contribution would be her published work. She also noted, however, that academic papers can take a year, sometimes longer, to go through the peer review process and, once published, many studies have a limited audience. The Syrian refugees posed similar questions; here, Irgil responded not only with honesty but also, given this population's vulnerable status, she provided them contact information for NGOs with which they could connect if they needed help or answers to specific questions.

For her part, Zvobgo was very upfront with her interviewees about her role as a researcher: she recognized that she is not someone who is on the front lines of the fight for human rights and transitional justice like they are. All she could/can do is use her platform to amplify their stories, bringing attention to their vital work through her future peer-reviewed publications. She also committed to sending them copies of the work, as electronic journal articles are often inaccessible due to paywalls and university press books are very expensive, especially for non-profits. Interviewees were very receptive; some were even moved by the degree of self-awareness and the commitment to do right by them. In some cases, this prompted them to share even more, because they knew that the researcher was really there to listen and to learn. This is something that junior scholars – and all scholars really – should always remember. We enter the field to be taught.

Final thoughts

We recommend approaching fieldwork as a learning experience as much as – or perhaps even more than – a data collection effort. While it is prudent to always exercise a healthy amount of skepticism about what people tell you and why, the participants in your research will likely have unique perspectives and knowledge that will challenge yours. Be an attentive listener and remember that they, too, are experts of their situations. Furthermore, we recommend that more institutions offer field research courses that prepare students beyond the topics we have covered here.

References

- Chambers-Ju, Christopher. 2014. "Data Collection, Opportunity Costs, and Problem Solving: Lessons from Field Research on Teachers' Unions in Latin America." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 47 (2): 405–9.
- Jensenius, Francesca Refsum. 2014. "The Fieldwork of Quantitative Data Collection." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 47 (2): 402–4.
- Kapiszewski, Diana, Lauren M. MacLean, and Benjamin L. Read. 2015. *Field Research in Political Science: Practices and Principles*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ortbals, Candice D., and Meg E. Rincker. 2009. "Fieldwork, Identities, and Intersectionality: Negotiating Gender, Race, Class, Religion, Nationality, and Age in the Research Field Abroad: Editors' Introduction." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 42 (2): 287–90.
- Skjelsbæk, Inger. 2018. Silence breakers in war and peace: research on gender and violence with an ethics of engagement. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 25(4): 496–520.
- Weiss, Meredith L., Allen Hicken, and Eric Martinez Kuhonta. 2017. "Political Science Field Research & Ethics: Introduction." *The American Political Science Association- Comparative Democratization Newsletter* 15 (3): 3–5.
- Williamson, Emma, Alison Gregory, Hilary Abrahams, Nadia Aghtaie, Sarah-Jane Walker, and Marianne Hester. 2020. Secondary Trauma: Emotional Safety in Sensitive Research. *Journal of Academic Ethics* 18(1): 55–70.
- Wood, Elizabeth Jean. 2006. The ethical challenges of field research in conflict zones. *Qualitative sociology* 29(3): 373–386.