



“Our medium, our canvas, is “the field,” a place both proximate and intimate (*because we have lived some part of our lives there*) as well as forever distant and unknowably “other” (*because our own destinies lie elsewhere*).” (Scheper-Hughes xii)

For ethnographers, “*the field*” is an environment where we spend countless hours participating in and observing everyday realities. We document “*who, what, where, when*” and “*why*” to address our hypotheses about the human condition, which in turn inform our research and advocacy.

Ethnographers have found themselves in the shanty towns of Rio, challenging misguided notions of poverty (Goldsitne). Others in courtrooms, listening to testimonies that detail violations of rights guaranteed to all human beings (Burton). Some conduct multi-sited research, where the ethnography takes place over multiple local, attempting to understand the phenomena of early childhood education in China, the U.S., and Japan (Huo et al.). My own research has taken me to the rainforests of Ecuador and urban Amazon of Brazil, recording the consequences of inadequate water on human wellbeing.

Our time in the field is both rewarding and laden with implications. If successful, it signifies an ethnographer’s ability to carry out research, with the manuscripts and presentations that follow, promising to advance our career; for those in university, it is the penultimate step before receiving their degree, often a masters, or a PhD; and as our research unfolds it’s not uncommon to have extraordinary experiences that redefine the way we think, feel, and perceive.

However, months, if not years, precede the field, as an ethnography is an iterative (*repetitive*) and recursive (*revisits itself*) process of abducting (*extracting*) data (Agar). Methods and theory are

carefully aligned to ensure we collect meaningful data (*avoiding simple description and limiting the extractive asymmetries of research*); the appropriate permissions are obtained; funding is pursued; and we prepare for the knowns and the unknowns of the field as best we can.

We are conditioned to acknowledge that things rarely go according to plan, in fact, one of ethnography's strengths is its' ability to respond and adapt. That it takes time to develop the rapport and relationships which ultimately become the ethnography, and that great care must be taken to maintain the anonymity of our informants and the knowledge they share (Bernard). As the wellbeing of graduate students has received more attention (Woolston), early career ethnographers (*such as myself*) are reminded to "take care of ourselves", but that our focus must be on carrying out research in the field (*it is not always easy to reconcile the two*).

What remains far less appreciated, and often unprepared for, is the emotional vulnerability and compromise that accompanies "*the field*".

The uncertain and fluid nature of ethnography lends itself to a wide range of emotions. Excitement often characterizes the initial stages of entering the field, when the possibilities seem abundant, and "everything" is potentially "something". However, as time goes on, most all ethnographers will encounter challenges, be those with participants/colleagues, doubts about themselves, and dilemmas that test our resolve to carry out the ethnography (Pollard). For as often as people are truthful, you may encounter those who are dishonest and deceive you; there are moments where the ethnography feels "messy" (*disorganized*) (Weisner), and you're unsure how to proceed or what to do; and some interactions (*a mother pleading with you to find medicine for her children during an interview or witnessing the distress of a grandmother simply trying to ensure the water her grandchild consumes is clean*) will make you question if research truly benefits society and our informants, as is so often claimed.

Time spent in the field may seem like an obvious consideration, but all too often is overlooked as a logistic of the ethnography. Many ethnographers plan for at least several months in the field, while others adhere to the long-held tradition of no less than a continuous year. This, of course, facilitates the ethnography, allowing us to engage with, and learn from the lives of those whose circumstances we seek to understand (Ingold). Unfortunately, it may also strain our relationships with those who remain "at home" (*family, friends, partners, etc.*) (Pollard). Regular and the desired amount of communication is not always possible, and it is difficult to take part in life events from afar (*births, death, accomplishments, etc.*). Even when they are with us, simultaneously balancing their needs and conducting research can be too much, and sometimes, we must accept that it is in our best interest to leave the field (Yates-Doerr).

Though hardly exhaustive, I hope this illustrates the true nature (*the double edge sword*) of "*the field*". The field is everyday life, for our participants, and for ourselves.

Too often, we create a fictitious separation (*an "other"*), where the field is little more than the time and place of our ethnography. We seemingly forget or are discouraged from acknowledging that every element of our life continues to take place as well. Such a mindset results from the outdated,

yet sustained (*by departments, advisors, and senior ethnographers*), notion of a hero's journey, where the lone-ethnographer, unburdened by familial ties or responsibilities, carries out their quest (*the research*), and resolves all on their own (Jessee et al.; Yates-Doerr; Günel et al.). This nothing short of unrealistic and harmful. The field is many things, but it should not be something the ethnographer must overcome.

The priority of the field needs to be enabling the ethnographer to exist to the best of their abilities, allowing them to focus on carrying out quality research in service of the human condition.

Departments, advisors, and funding institutions must further recognize this and provide support and understanding where possible. The discipline of ethnography must reflect on this as well. We cannot lose sight of what the field is, or we will fail to not only take care of ourselves, but produce meaningful ethnography.

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