

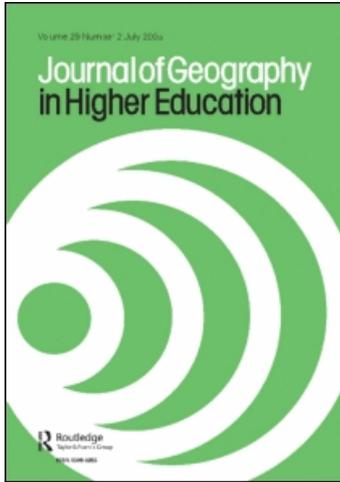
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Dear Diary: Early Career Geographers Collectively Reflect on Their Qualitative Field Research Experiences

Elizabeth Heller^a; Julia Christensen^a; Lindsay Long^a; Catrina A. Mackenzie^a; Philip M. Osano^a; Britta Ricker^a; Emily Kagan^a; Sarah Turner^a

^a Department of Geography, McGill University, Canada

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Dear Diary: Early Career Geographers Collectively Reflect on Their Qualitative Field Research Experiences

ELIZABETH HELLER, JULIA CHRISTENSEN, LINDSAY LONG,
CATRINA A. MACKENZIE, PHILIP M. OSANO, BRITTA RICKER,
EMILY KAGAN & SARAH TURNER

Department of Geography, McGill University, Canada

ABSTRACT *After completing a qualitative methods course in geography, we moved classroom discussions into practice. While undertaking graduate fieldwork in sites across the globe, we participated in critical, reflexive journaling. Whereas journal writing is often private, we shared our entries, aiming to facilitate rigour while concurrently exploring similarities and differences. We became conscious of common themes including ethical dilemmas, power relations and researcher fatigue. In this paper, we critically analyse these experiences, examining the strategies implemented to resolve such predicaments. We argue that reflexive group journaling during fieldwork is a valuable learning tool which could be introduced into many research-active curricula.*

KEY WORDS: Fieldwork, journal writing, student voice, ethics, gatekeepers, researcher fatigue

Introduction

Upon completing a qualitative methods course designed for Masters' and Doctoral students in human geography, we decided to move theory beyond the classroom and into practice. During 2008, we undertook reflexive journal writing while undertaking thesis fieldwork in sites as diverse as India, Vietnam, Uganda, Kenya, Barbados and Canada to explore commonalities and differences across field experiences. Additionally, we wanted to facilitate rigour within our research projects by using field journals as reflexive tools (cf. Baxter & Eyles, 1997). Our aim was not necessarily to get 'better data', but rather to do 'better research' (Pillow, 2003).

In geographic literature, journaling is increasingly discussed as a means to promote active student learning on undergraduate field trips and to facilitate course assessment (see Harrison *et al.*, 2003; Park, 2003; McGuinness & Simm, 2005; Dummer *et al.*, 2008; McGuinness, 2009). However, we were interested in how *group* journaling could develop and enrich field experiences, and reflections upon these, for students undertaking graduate research. While typical journal writing practice is individual and isolated, we committed ourselves to share our entries as a group upon returning from the field (communication

Correspondence Address: Julia Christensen, Department of Geography, McGill University, 805 Rue Sherbrooke Ouest, Montréal, Québec H3A 2K6, Canada. Email: julia.christensen@mail.mcgill.ca

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difficulties limited us from doing so during fieldwork). As such, we could benefit from collective reflection, debate and deliberation. Concurrently, the mutual newness of our experiences facilitated an important level of honesty with one another and ourselves. We became aware of both the changes we experienced as researchers and individuals, and a number of common challenges woven through our diverse field experiences.

In this paper, we critique a range of research situations and the field 'survival' skills that emerged from our group journaling experience that could be usefully incorporated into the reflexive practices of other apprentice researchers. The lessons culled from our journal entries relate to ethical dilemmas, particularly in cross-cultural contexts; power relations, especially the role of gatekeepers; and the impact of fatigue on the researcher. This article therefore has two aims: first, to act as a starting piece for classroom discussions regarding the importance of reflexive practices and social justice considerations when considering the practicalities of fieldwork and second, to reveal the possibilities of a new model of group journaling for graduate student field-researchers.

Next, we detail the group journaling methods that we utilized. Then, from an analysis of our journal entries, we explore common and contrasting experiences that group members encountered while undertaking field research, each followed in turn by the solutions we attempted to enact. Finally, we discuss the importance of journaling as a process in the field, exploring how it supports the practice of reflexivity and strengthens research rigour, while also providing a place for us to vent our frustrations, face our fears and document our growth.

Methods

Following the completion of our qualitative methods course, seven of the eight students planned to undertake graduate fieldwork in the second half of 2008. As the course drew to a close, we realized that continuing our classroom discussions in the field could be enlightening. We agreed to individually document our field experiences, paying particular attention to themes discussed in class, and then share our journal writing with one another upon fieldwork completion (while respecting research participant confidentiality). Through our methods course, we had developed a strong rapport among group members and with the professor, making us open to trusting one another with our personal, honest reflections during fieldwork. All eight students and the professor participated in the project, although with different roles. Journals were kept by the seven students entering the field, while Emily, not engaging in fieldwork, took on different duties explained below. Likewise, Sarah, the course teacher, did not keep a journal, but mentored the project and helped with editing this article. A brief introduction to the seven individual thesis topics, central to understanding the diversity of our journal entries, is detailed in Table 1, while Figure 1 places our field experiences in a global perspective.

Before fieldwork, we agreed to focus upon, but not limit ourselves to, a series of *a priori* codes in our journal writing, specifically ethics, gatekeepers, positionality, power, reflexivity, rigour and subjectivity; topics explored during our course. We each kept a journal for six weeks during fieldwork, addressing these themes when relevant, while concurrently documenting any other experiences relating to qualitative research approaches. We individually peer coded our journal entries following our field seasons according to these *a priori* themes, while also identifying three *a posteriori* themes: participant expectations, practicalities and logistics, and field context (including fatigue). Additionally, Emily and

Table 1. Details of our individual research projects

Contributor	Degree	Research topic	Field site(s)	Main methods	Months in field, 2008
Elizabeth	MSc	Comparing agricultural land use from remote sensing and field interviews	Malaprabha watershed, Karnataka, India	Interviews, field surveys, transect walks, participant observation	June–December
Julia	PhD	Housing insecurity and homelessness in the Northwest Territories, Canada	Yellowknife and Inuvik, Northwest Territories, Canada	Interviews, participant observation, focus groups	April–August
Lindsay	MA	The global reach of upland ethnic minority textile commodity chains	Hanoi and northern highlands, Vietnam	Interviews, participant observation	May–August
Catrina	PhD	Efficacy of conservation compensation projects around a national park	Kibale National Park, Uganda	Interviews, questionnaires, field surveys, transect walks	May–August
Philip	PhD	Payments to promote biodiversity conservation	Nairobi, Kenya	Interviews, participant observation	June–August
Britta	MSc	Using the Geoweb to access and distribute locals' information on environmental change	Holetown, Barbados	Interviews, focus groups, participatory mapping workshops	July–October
Edward	PhD	Using the Geoweb for intergenerational indigenous knowledge transfer	Northern Quebec	Interviews, participant observation	July

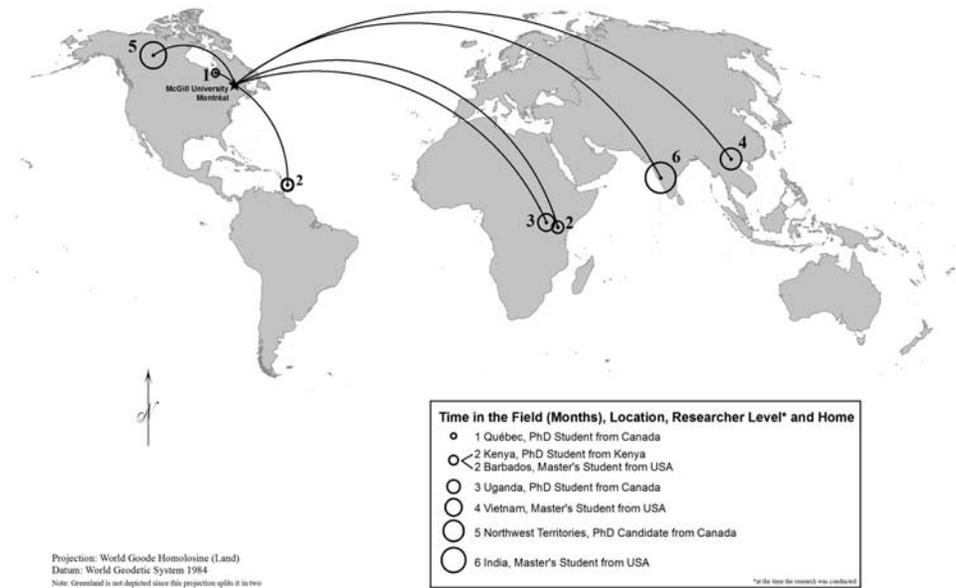


Figure 1. The locations of our fieldwork

Sarah developed a ‘pre-fieldwork interview’ based upon our *a priori* themes, along with questions regarding fieldwork expectations and concerns. Similarly, after the seven of us returned from fieldwork, we were each re-interviewed to capture our impressions of the experience. Data from these interviews also contribute to our findings.

We collectively designed a one-day workshop in December 2008 to share fieldwork experiences among the group. From that workshop emerged this article, for which we decided to highlight three concerns about which we felt we had worthy contributions to make, namely ethics, power relations and fatigue, with discussions of positionality and reflexivity woven throughout. The process of writing this paper was itself an exercise in reflexivity, with some of us realizing just how much our perspectives had changed since composing our journal entries. This process was at times uncomfortable, as we wrestled with acknowledging our own academic and personal growth.¹ We grappled with the meaning and influence of the concepts we had been exposed to in our methods course, and ultimately deepened our understanding of the challenges of fieldwork. We encourage other groups of like-minded graduate students and their teachers to consider such an exercise due to the valuable lessons we have learnt, lessons that have extended our classroom learning well beyond our expectations, within a new teaching–research nexus (cf. Healey, 2005).

Taking Theory to the Field

Diverse Ethical Dilemmas

Not surprisingly, given the range of our research contexts and varying positionalities, we confronted and negotiated ethical dilemmas faced in the field in a multiplicity of ways.

Nevertheless, several common elements emerged across our respective research experiences. We voiced concerns in our journals about the potential vulnerability of our participants with regard to their involvement in our research, and the potential for harm to the wider community in which our research was conducted. Many of these anxieties related to the realities of trying to apply textbook ethical approaches 'on the ground' (cf. Hay, 1998; Kearns *et al.*, 1998; Guillemin & Gilliam, 2004; Boyd *et al.*, 2008). For example, the process of informed consent regularly had to be adjusted according to the particular situation, such as when a participant started to divulge information immediately. Julia (15/04/08), working in the Northwest Territories of Canada, recounted her concerns when interviewing such a research participant:

I didn't have a chance to go through the consent process with her in the beginning though, and as she was speaking I was aware of how that made her storytelling even more vulnerable. But to interrupt her with the oral consent script wouldn't have been appropriate.²

Britta (26/09/08) struggled with different concerns over confidentiality in Barbados:

[Participants] love sharing their ideas with me and feel proud that they have a certain local knowledge that others would want to read, listen or look at. The participants want recognition for their knowledge. Although I try to be as careful as possible to protect the identity of the participants, they also would like to be recognized for their knowledge and contribution.

Members of our group also expressed concern over the degree of trust we were given by research participants and worried about our capacity to meet their expectations (cf. Campbell *et al.*, 2006). The information that was shared with us by trusting participants was left in our hands, to take with us and use in ways over which we essentially had control. This information was often very personal or sensitive, so much so that revealing the information could be detrimental to participants (for example, if a participant was to later read about certain difficult experiences she had described). This fear of potentially harming participants was reflected in Julia's experiences while interviewing the research participant mentioned above:

I became aware of how delicate this was... this sharing... I felt as though I was being handed a very huge piece of her. I had not even asked a single question. It was as though the story was right there, and she just needed to tell it, get it off her chest... I didn't want to cause her any hurt, though. I was worried after I left the interview that she might regret being so open with me (15/04/08).³

Such experiences also raise important questions concerning potential emotional harm to *researchers* themselves (Widdowfield, 2000; Hubbard *et al.*, 2001). Exposure to painful stories, emotional accounts, dangerous events or illegal activities can take a serious toll on researchers. This poses the potential for many other forms of harm, too often overlooked in standard ethical review procedures (cf. Nordstrom & Robben, 1995; Israel & Hay, 2006).

Ethical dilemmas pertaining to broader harm to the community were also raised. Catrina and Britta worried that the outcomes of their research could hurt the communities where

they were working, again reflecting a concern that the power we hold as researchers can inflict more damage than good. Catrina (19/05/08) noted, regarding her inquiries to the Ugandan Wildlife Authority (UWA):

I was asking UWA about paid resource access agreements [for locals]. Unfortunately, the community warden had no record of any resource agreement in that area . . . I hope I have not initiated a ranger patrol there that will catch some wood poachers, especially since I am supposed to be doing no harm.⁴

We were all aware that research has the potential to be extractive, and often worried that our research outputs, or what we left behind, would not make up for participants' generous contributions of time and knowledge. While working with small-scale farmers in southern India, Elizabeth reported:

I feel like it is such an extractive process right now . . . Taking knowledge from the farmers and their time. Taking food, space, electricity, networking connections . . . Taking advice, support, listening ears . . . Taking food, shelter, kindness, warmth, electricity, water . . . (Elizabeth, 13/09/08).

In some instances, researchers before us had engaged in research of little use for the communities where they worked (discussed in Sidaway, 1992; Kassam & Tettey, 2003). Worse still, researchers had left with local knowledge, never to communicate with the community again. For example, village chairmen in Uganda continually reiterated their apprehension to Catrina that researchers came once but never returned to share results. We were greatly concerned not to continue such research relationships, yet at the same time felt limited by our 'newness' to the research process/field, as well as by the expectations and requirements of our academic institutions. Each of us wrote in our journals about our discomfort with the idea that while many were contributing time and energy to our respective projects, we might not be able to return those contributions in a way that felt just. These entries addressed issues of exchange both in terms of the potential or need for research to fuel positive social change, as well as more practical matters regarding adequately rewarding participants for their time and contributions.

Ethical solutions? Participatory researchers are critical of the "taking of people's time" (Chambers, 2006, p. 6), extracting information only for the outsider's benefit. However, with the exception of specific participatory action research approaches in which data, analysis and decision-making are shared with the study community (cf. Chambers, 1994; Kindon & Elwood, 2009), the question of how or even if researchers 'give back' is less frequently dealt with in the mainstream geography literature (although see Sidaway, 1992; Robson, 1994). Most researchers distribute findings in academic journals, however, local communities, non-governmental organizations and even governments (particularly in developing countries) have limited or no access to such journals. Justifiably, Sidaway (1992, p. 406) suggests "considering outlets beyond the margins of academic journals and 'professional' conferences" to share research results.

Within our group, we employed different ways to try to contribute meaningfully to the communities we worked with. In northern Canada, Julia engaged in a community-based approach to her research, developed through consultation with organizations in the

research communities where she worked. Research participants themselves also made recommendations regarding how they wanted results to be delivered, such as interactive community workshops or presentations to key political figures, which we implemented whenever feasible. In Barbados, Britta used her Web development skills to assist a local community organization to improve its website. Meanwhile, Catrina and her field assistant worked as conduits to facilitate communication between villagers and the UWA.

Both Edward, working in northern Québec, and Julia in the Northwest Territories, have incorporated a member-checking component into their fieldwork plans, where communities will be presented with preliminary findings and asked for feedback on these early results (cf. Turner & Coen, 2008). In Kenya, Philip is also planning participatory scenario planning workshops where stakeholders, including local communities, will discuss the research for the purpose of developing alternative plausible futures.

We often also felt that more immediate, culturally appropriate contributions were important to compensate research participants, such as gift certificates (Julia), small gifts from Canada or purchases from the participants' shops (Lindsay) or soft drinks for interviewees (Catrina, Philip). Julia also worked to contribute to the community-at-large by giving workshops on qualitative methods to local college students. Nevertheless, while we have employed many different tactics in an effort to give back to the communities where we have worked, we continue to mull over how to meaningfully contribute and recognize the efforts of our research participants.

Power Relations: Redefining Gatekeepers

Gatekeepers were central to each of our research endeavours. While usually seen as authority figures with whom access has to be negotiated, or as obstacles to be overcome (Mandel, 2003), in our field experiences we found this approach too restrictive and somewhat problematic. Although access did have to be negotiated, for instance with landowners or with various levels of government and institutions, often those we initially considered gatekeepers turned out to be *facilitators* of the research process rather than obstacles to accessing respondents and resources.

A broader definition of the gatekeeper includes "those who provide—directly or indirectly—access to key resources needed to do research, be those resources logistical, human, institutional or informational" (Campbell *et al.*, 2006, p. 98). We propose to expand this definition even further to include persons who control and facilitate access to respondents, resources and knowledge, such as interpreters, social contacts and research participants themselves, who hold the ultimate power to allow or deny our work.

During our research, we encountered circumstances where gatekeepers blocked, or considerably slowed, the research process (cf. Wolf, 1996). They would grant access for interviews but then attempt to control, manipulate or influence respondents' views, ostensibly taking advantage of existing unequal power differentials. In southern India for instance, Elizabeth found it difficult to interview landless small-scale farmers on their landlord's property because the landlords were present. The landlords attempted—often successfully—to manipulate respondents' responses. Elizabeth noted (15/09/08) in her journal:

It was painfully obvious that the 'smaller farmers' were totally cowed into saying whatever the landlords wanted/prompted/argued them into saying. They were made

to feel stupid and uneducated by the landlord's constant revision and criticism of their statements.

Additionally, the time taken to negotiate access with gatekeepers can be a lengthy, frustrating experience, affecting one's emotional condition. This was manifest in Uganda, where Catrina had to gain 33 approvals from four levels of government to carry out three months of fieldwork. The slow progress of gaining these approvals took a toll, as Catrina recorded, "I am not really enjoying fieldwork. It is arduous physical work and fraught with the need to get permission for everything. As yet I have barely any of the permissions I need for the full program and it is frustrating" (30/05/08).

In Vietnam, Lindsay too became frustrated by her lack of progress in negotiating access to information from a manager of a non-government organization, crucial for her research. This potential informant appeared increasingly evasive, despite promises to avail herself for interviews. Lindsay (25/06/08) lamented in her journal: "When I called today, she said that she never got the email and asked me to send it again. I was looking carefully over the address I typed initially, and it is identical to the one on the business card she gave me when I first met her." Two weeks later Lindsay continued:

Dear God! Bad luck with [x NGO] *again*. This is frustrating me to the point of tears. Now the interview which had been scheduled has been cancelled because she will be out of town, and when I inquired as to when she might be available, she said she would get back to me.

However, while certain gatekeepers did block or slow down our research, more often than not gatekeepers—using our broader definition above—facilitated the research in ways that were beyond our expectations. For example, despite delays in Uganda, none of the 33 approvals Catrina requested were actually rejected. Furthermore, once approved, the village chairmen helped to arrange focus group meetings for her. In Kenya, it took Philip more than a month to meet with one of his key informants, although the meeting, when it finally took place, was very productive: "In the end, I was happy that after almost a month, and after having cancelled our meeting three times, I finally managed an interview with X, and was able to get very useful information to advance my research" (8/08/08).

Some of our social contacts in the field also acted as facilitating gatekeepers because of their connections in our areas of field research. This was markedly the case for Philip, whose research in Kenya, his home country, was to a great extent facilitated by friends and former colleagues who were able to arrange meetings with government officials without having to go through lengthy bureaucratic processes.

All of us employed informed consent as the means of inviting participants to be part of our research. Yet even after this process, participants retain the power to allow or deny our access to their knowledge, opinions and personal thoughts through more subtle means (cf. Nairn *et al.*, 2005). In most cases, we found, as Lindsay (3/09/08) noted, respondents were "happy to talk . . . happy to share information about their pasts and their businesses". Nevertheless, while one respondent in Vietnam did not verbally deny access, he physically avoided Lindsay after their first interview so as to evade answering any more questions, applying his own form of covert resistance.

Included in our broader definition of gatekeepers, interpreters can be fundamental to the research process. In turn, the position that an interpreter holds in the community, their

educational background and personal biases can influence the content of interviews (Edwards, 1998; Temple & Young, 2004).

Three of us worked with interpreters in the field: Lindsay in Vietnam, Elizabeth in India and Catrina in Uganda. While Lindsay had taken Vietnamese language lessons in advance and could cope with basic interactions, Elizabeth and Catrina relied more heavily on interpreters. Elizabeth chronicled the positionalities of her two interpreters, one male and one female, and the effect of these positionalities on her level of trust in the translations they provided. Regarding her male interpreter, she observed:

He is clearly most comfortable with other men his age [circa 25]. When we do an interview with a younger man there is joking, casual chitchat, friendliness all around. He almost refuses to talk to women . . . it takes noticeable effort on the part of my interpreter to redirect his focus on the women.

She then compared this to her experiences with her female interpreter:

When with women, [my female interpreter] was of course extremely comfortable, polite, and everyone would smile and be warm with her. When with men, we were both treated somewhat like anomalies. She perhaps more than myself, even.

Elizabeth's experiences reflect our dependence not only on the interpreter themselves, but also on the social and gendered positions of these individuals. Recent works have begun to problematize the interpreter as 'invisible' in the research process, suggesting instead that the dynamics interpreters bring to an interview merit a more rigorous treatment of their role and influence with respect to power and subjectivity (Edwards, 1998; Temple & Young, 2004). Our experiences indicate that this critical approach is certainly warranted and that our interpreters and field assistants were often our "gatekeepers of meaning" (Elizabeth, 26/07/08).

Opening the gate. How does one negotiate positive relationships with gatekeepers? Elizabeth and Lindsay each found themselves witnessing long discussions between interviewees and their interpreter, only to have this summed up in English in one sentence or, worse still, a monosyllabic 'yes/no'. To try to understand the nuances being missed, various approaches were trialled. In Vietnam, Lindsay included her field assistant in post-interview debriefings (cf. Freed, 1988). Lindsay noted that her assistant "really enjoyed the part of our interview time where we sat down and talked a bit at the end . . . I like to think of this as 'debriefing' and it is also useful for me to get her take on things, considering she is an 'insider' and might have a different view than me" (10/07/08).

As an alternative route, Catrina used multiple interpreters for her focus groups in Uganda.

Since the interviews are held in the local language, [the senior assistant] is verbally translating what people say and I then write down what he says. The two other field assistants write down in English what they hear in the local language. Triangulating the three sets of notes, theirs and mine, provided a much fuller and clearer record of the group interview (11/06/08).

Over time, we came to appreciate that a gatekeeper usually had a job to do and was not necessarily trying to stand in the way of our research, although *in situ* that could be hard to believe when faced with a difficult situation. For example, Catrina (5/06/08) came to realize the complexities involved when negotiating access with one village chairman:

The village chairman was very cautious with us and wanted to see all our approvals before he would agree to approve us being in his village zone. The reason he was being so cagey [he informed us later], is that some people had come to his village a few years back with fake documents, had him sign his approval and then entered the park and poached an elephant. Eventually, he agreed we could come back to [do my research] as long as we checked with him first.

Ultimately, working with gatekeepers requires patience and the willingness to take whatever time is needed to gain trust and support. We found that understanding the local context was essential for getting a grip on local politics and cultural norms, and gaining an appreciation of who we should be speaking to about certain issues. Even if a specific person did not initially seem linked to our work, they often turned out to be the one to facilitate a certain meeting or permit, or provide access to a specific, crucial document. Keeping a very open mind and a cheerful demeanour was therefore essential as we began to learn the ‘local ropes’.

Fatigue and Its Broader Implications in the Field

The ability to keep such an open mind and cheerful demeanour often depended directly on our well-being and levels of fatigue. The causes of fatigue in the field are diverse. Cultural differences, monetary concerns, illness, homesickness, weather and logistical inconveniences can all contribute to diminishing the mental and physical health of researchers. In our experiences, central elements of fatigue included dependency and changing networks, struggles with abstractions or things ‘bigger than ourselves’, emotional or physical stress and anxiety.

As we coded our journals, our dependency on other people in the field—such as gatekeepers—quickly became apparent. These realities can contribute to fatigue when carefully constructed self-images of independent, confident researchers begin to unravel. We found it difficult to make connections and form important networks when we felt overwhelmed or overexposed by our newness to a community, and in such circumstances it was tempting to isolate oneself. In this regard Julia commented: “It’s a struggle to push myself to contact people. I’m not totally sure why—I guess I feel overwhelmed” (1/04/08). In post-fieldwork discussions, it was clear that many of us had experienced similar struggles.

Alongside making contacts and establishing trust, we found that physical and subjective movement contributed to feelings of being overwhelmed (or as we later phrased it ‘overwhelmshim’). We all commented on concerns regarding sleeping and work arrangements (cf. Robson, 1994). As Elizabeth (29/09/08) described during her fieldwork: “I currently have my things spread between two places, but the . . . places I regularly sleep are about five. If I am in the field late, I simply sleep at my interpreter’s house. If I am at my friend’s house late, I sleep there.”

Moreover, not being able to locate oneself can lead to emotional dislocation as well. Lindsay (16/07/08) struggled with these feelings while in Hanoi:

So now I am wondering about everything I am doing, if it is going well, if I am doing good work, if there is a point to me being here. This is such a change from last week or the week before, when I was so happy about everything and really felt as though I was making great progress. Maybe it is the amount of time left – there isn't much, and maybe it is the pressure of knowing that this will all have to be done before then. I just don't know. But something has got to give. I am planning the trip up to Sa Pa, and I am hoping that that will bring about some kind of change in my mood. Maybe it will reinvigorate me? Because now I am finding it hard to wake up and walk out the door.

Ultimately, we found that emotional dislocation can lead to feeling overextended and frail: "This morning and last night as well, I can feel the possibility of a crash coming on. . . . Mostly because I have started to put some pressure on myself; looking at the calendar and realizing the time constraints I am facing" (Elizabeth, 12/09/08).

Lindsay and Elizabeth's entries reflect some of the pressures that can cause general fatigue in the field, such as concerns regarding whether one's fieldwork is rigorous enough. Both also noted a temporal element, experienced by most of us, as we fixated on the calendar and work to be completed in the field time remaining. At times we experienced research to be a lonely, exhausting process. Each member struggled with her or his own 'breaking point', reaching a limit in terms of what could be handled emotionally, physically and, at times, ethically.

Fatigue management: lessons from our 'down days'. An awareness that research fatigue includes a lack of motivation and feelings of being overwhelmed that go beyond just 'feeling tired' can help one to accept and resolve these concerns. By acknowledging this during her fieldwork in southern India, Elizabeth found a positive side to the fatigue she was experiencing:

I have had a total lack of motivation the past few days, feeling like whatever I am doing is worthless, and perhaps even worse than worthless, harmful. Today I realize that it is probably pretty normal to feel this way . . . It is probably really good to go through periods of feeling really terrible about the work. Somehow I hope it will keep me honest (Elizabeth, 20/10/08).

We frequently found that these feelings were directly linked to being confronted by things beyond our control. However, focusing upon elements that *were* within our control could often lead to 'feeling better'. Often these realizations came after a breakdown or burn-out period, but by implementing them we averted further similar crises. As Catrina (25/06/08) noted in Uganda after a particularly stressful work period, "I have decided that I am not working Saturdays from now on. I do not want to burn out and I think I was well on my way to doing that before the back [injury] slowed me down".

Finding small ways to make ourselves feel at home, like engaging in familiar daily activities, likewise helped us regain a certain solid footing and sense of purpose that

calmed us in the storms of research. As Edward (14/07/08) reported, “today I had the whole house to myself . . . it felt great to have the freedom to cook dinner and watch a movie”. Furthermore, instituting a steady work pace or routine often helped in overcoming feelings of loneliness, as noted by Catrina (29/05/08): “Now that I have started to take data and have some work to do every day, I am finding I am a little less homesick.”

Making step-by-step plans also helped when we felt that the ‘big picture’ of our research was still elusive, as Elizabeth (9/09/08) observed:

Despite feeling like I was lacking support and needing it bad, I managed to just make some decisions today and things seem to be moving. . . . (I feel) able to start planning the next few days. . . . I feel a lot better knowing that I have some sort of plan for the rest of this week.

Ultimately, it was our patience and ability to remain calm in response to difficult and/or frustrating situations that was often our ‘saving grace’ (we nicknamed this ‘Zen mode’); these virtues were essential as we learned through trial and error that it simply takes time to adapt to a new environment, learn and acclimate (physically, mentally and socially), as well as adjust to other’s timetables, priorities and expectations. Upon returning from Kenya, Philip reflected candidly:

I realized that you have to be patient. It’s good to be in the field and . . . have a plan and have it written down. You can move in a linear fashion such that you do one thing and then do the next. But when you get to the practical issues, it’s a question of the expected and the unexpected. It’s a question of being resilient. . . . I think the biggest thing is patience, it’s a very very important attribute (post-field interview, 9/12/08).

A crucial part of having patience with our research and ourselves was the recognition that we would not always feel as down and frustrated as we did at that particular moment. Julia (4/04/08) knew intuitively that her time in the field would improve, recording: “I have been feeling lousy in body and spirit all week and it has definitely affected my confidence and motivation. I know next week will be better.” Elizabeth (15/10/08) summarized what many of us felt throughout the process:

I realize that you can’t push fieldwork faster than it wants to go. . . . research is a real lesson in patience, and knowing how to do good/hard work even when you can’t see the larger picture. Knowing how to keep taking small bites each day even if you can’t see the whole cake. I have been feeling frustrated with myself for not being able to do more, write more, be more motivated to analyse all that is around me. But I realize I have to accept the ‘dead air’ time as part and parcel of the research process. Eureka moments don’t come each day.

By recognizing fatigue, embracing it as part of the process, and establishing positive coping strategies, our research is not only made more rigorous, but we also mitigate many ethical dilemmas that may arise as a result of a researcher ‘running on empty’.

Discussion: Journaling and Its Diverse Contributions

Journaling As a Reflexive Tool

There are many reasons to keep a field journal. As anthropologist Roger Sanjek (1990) noted, journal writing provides a personal space to the researcher that is separate from field notes, a space that we all appreciated during our field seasons. Often, it serves as one of the only spaces researchers may have all to themselves in the field; a place to record joys, frustrations and fears as fieldwork continues. It is also a collection of memories; a way of documenting one's journey as a researcher. Using our journals as a reflexive process both in the field and afterwards allowed us to document important pathways of learning about our research and about ourselves.

Ultimately, the field research process is about learning. While focusing our attention on the tasks of executing fieldwork design and compiling data, other learning processes occur simultaneously. For example, we discovered that while doing research, we must also find ways to negotiate numerous research relationships, manage fatigue and take care of ourselves. The reflexivity involved in journaling facilitated a heightened awareness of the data, our research contexts, our roles as researchers within these contexts, and how we engaged with the research environment. It also allowed for an increased awareness of ourselves as 'positioned subjects' as we considered our (inter)actions (Rosaldo, 1989). This awareness in turn strengthened our research projects as well as our skills as researchers. Furthermore, by keeping a journal, and reflecting on the fieldwork process before, during and after with a group of researchers at similar points in their respective careers, we were able to better discuss, understand and address the learning and questioning that happened beyond interviews and observations.

Research Changes the Researcher

Fresh from our qualitative methods course, many of us went to the field preoccupied with concerns related to ethics, positionality, power dynamics and so on. However, we were less aware of the potential changes in our own lives that would accompany fieldwork. In the pre-fieldwork interviews, few of us mentioned transformations that we expected to undergo during our time in the field. This is surprising considering that many of us were entering the field for the first time, some of us were going to places we had never before visited, and all of us were experimenting with methods new to us. One thing we are all sure of now: the researchers we were at the outset of our fieldwork are not the same researchers who emerged on the other side.

Journal writing made us aware of this process by allowing us to look back and see where we had come from as well as where and why we changed direction. We had the evidence of those changes each step of the way. The intermingling of change, reflection and reflexivity created feedback, through which we each engaged in a process of learning that was critical for the development of important fieldwork skills, such as coping strategies. This process of active engagement with change allowed us to be more patient with the research process and with ourselves, as we observed subtle forms of progress.

Despite our observations of change in the field, with the exception of a few articles (Morton, 1995; Mandel, 2003), there is little peer-reviewed literature on the effects of the fieldwork experience on the researcher. The commonality of our experiences led us to believe that this is an important gap, and that as qualitative researchers we would benefit

from a more open, frank discussion of the ‘personal’ in fieldwork. We are encouraged, and indeed *required* by ethics review boards, to carefully assess potential harm that our research may pose to participants and communities, yet there is little formal encouragement to think of the impact of fieldwork and research in general on the researcher.

We each shared the sentiment that the majority of changes we underwent were positive. Frequently, we described our experiences as times of growing and learning, as Julia noted in her post-fieldwork interview (10/12/08), “I grew as a person. My understanding of the issues that I’m studying is much more nuanced and intimate than it ever was. I changed my entire way of viewing homelessness and the factors involved”. Elizabeth surmised: “[Fieldwork] took me down a lot of notches. It humbles you; you feel really stupid a lot. Which is good because you are. On the other hand, I know that I have grown a huge amount. I think I’ve learned a lot of patience” (post-fieldwork interview, 11/12/08).

The positive changes brought about through fieldwork are an important part of the research experience and need to be recognized, even celebrated. Fieldwork is not simply about data collection; it is also about relationships and both personal and professional development; journaling allowed us to share and reflect upon this as a group.

Building Rigour Through Reflexivity

I am constantly wondering if I am being rigorous enough. I am documenting everything I am doing, observing, and how each of my plans has changed. Is this enough rigour? (Britta, 16/09/08)

In the context of qualitative research, rigour implies the satisfaction of principles of academic integrity such as responsibility and honesty, which necessitate thoughtful self-reflection. To this end, journaling has been cited as an important practice for providing added context and depth to data collection (Baxter & Eyles, 1997). In this way, we argue that journal writing goes beyond personal reflection. It is an additional source of data, a place where you jot down your observations and your interactions. It is a log of what worked, what did not and, most importantly, why. Not only did journaling assist each of us in identifying the processes of change that took place in the field, but the reflexivity we engaged in through this process strengthened the rigour in our individual projects. The transparency, thoroughness and candour of our research accounts helped to build a firm foundation for understanding our own research processes, from which we could explore the multiple facets of our fieldwork experiences.

The practice of journaling allowed for the creation of what Koch (2006, p. 91) calls the “decision trail”. The documentation of decisions and changes of direction in the field establishes the trustworthiness of the research by providing detail on the events, influences and actions of the researcher. Not only does such a documentation process enhance rigour by encouraging us to be honest about the constraints of our methods, positionality and context (Koch, 2006), but also by valuing our reflections while in the field we are better able to learn ‘on the go’, adapt to situations as needed and improve our research process.

Each of us was inspired at different times to adjust our research design, methods and even research questions in response to new realities and challenges that emerged, as Elizabeth (13/09/08) demonstrated:

We stopped inside one family's house briefly and then for the next 4 hours, it was a big wandering focus group. About 8 farmers, myself and (interpreter), tramping through fields.... As I write this I realize that focus groups would have been a better method than individual interviews, given the group culture that I seem to be encountering here. At one point today I got frustrated and told the group to let the farmer who owned the land speak, but looking back on it, in a way I was imposing my sense of self and individuality, of property and division on them.

Excerpts such as this one provide the information necessary to critically re-evaluate one's work, a necessary step in building rigour. The process of working through these challenges while in the field allowed us to undertake a "conscious deliberation of what we do, how we interpret and how we relate to subjects" (Baxter & Eyles, 1997, p. 505).

Lessons Learned

Journaling has been a rigour-building exercise, leading us to contemplate and question our own positionality, an exploration that took place both in the field and afterwards. Journaling also helped each of us to negotiate interactions in the field. The process of writing things down and mulling over one's written words, made it easier for us to come to grips with the situations we faced and, when necessary, establish new directions in research approach, methodology and ethical considerations. Journaling also allowed us to be more aware of the impact of the research process on ourselves. This 'self-checking' improved transparency with regard to our situatedness in the field. Moreover, journaling as a reflexive tool was critical for painting a more complete picture of the 'dialogical process' of research, one structured by both researcher and participants (England, 1994; Fine, 1994). By writing everything down and evaluating the research process, we could get at those spaces in-between; the spaces of dialogue between researchers and everyone—and everything—around them.

After we completed our fieldwork and began to share our journal entries with one another, we found many common threads woven through our writing. Despite being immersed in diverse locales, with very different positionalities, many of the themes that we dealt with were remarkably similar. We had pondered our positionalities, stressed over ethical dilemmas concerning how to give back to our respondents and the broader community, agonized over local wishes to be named versus our own ethical concerns over confidentiality, and struggled with local findings that were counter to law, regulations or more powerful players. We had felt strained by our dependency on numerous gatekeepers at institutions and in local communities, negotiated and renegotiated the roles of our interpreters, and felt frazzled as we dealt with fatigue. Journaling and sharing these experiences and others has been a critical methodological and evaluative technique for our individual research projects that has proved to be incredibly useful. Moreover, in addition to the journal writing itself, the process of going about this exercise as a group, before, during and after fieldwork, has been extremely valuable. We encourage other early career researchers, and those who teach and guide them, to consider incorporating similar exercises into both university courses on research methods and in the practice of field research.

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Notes

- ¹ One of us chose anonymity at this stage due to discomfort with the personal changes revealed in this process. Nevertheless, this individual gave permission for his journal data to be used to maintain the integrity of the group project as a whole. The pseudonym, Edward Smith, is used for this colleague.
- ² After the interview was finished, Julia asked for oral consent from the research participant, who willingly agreed.
- ³ A few days later, Julia followed up with a phone call to check in with the research participant and ensure she was comfortable with what she had shared during the interview; the research participant stated that she was and has remained in contact.
- ⁴ As it turned out, there was a paid access agreement to remove the exotic tree species from that park area, so the activity was legal.

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