Compelled to Err: Fieldwork as Iterative Experiential Learning

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research question, one runs the danger of simply translating their work without much additional academic benefit (and wasting a whole lot of time while doing it). When it comes to some of the techniques of conducting research, we have to read between the lines of *Designing Social Inquiry* to fully grasp the potential of some of the practices that its authors might not have fully appreciated. The literature on methodology has grown since King, Keohane, and Verba's volume, and researchers have rediscovered the advantages of small-N and case studies (Brady and Collier 2002). An appreciation of intensive elite interviews and an understanding of their importance are among methodological rediscoveries (Rathbun 2008). I found interviews to be particularly helpful in an environment such as Colombia, where politics do not necessarily adhere to formal norms.

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During my initial trip to the Chapare region of Bolivia in December 2012—the first time I truly felt "in the field," in the sense that I was on my own, without immediate recourse to institutional support of any kind—I spent about a week doing introductory interviews with local community leaders and other initial contacts. While there I spent a day exploring a couple of the main towns along the primary highway of the region. During my afternoon stop in Shinahota, I wandered along the streets of its market, the largest in the area. It was such a novel experience, like but unlike the markets of La Paz and Cochabamba I had come to know, that I succumbed to the temptation to take a few pictures of the scene without first seeking permission from those in it, something I had previously resolved never to do in the field. I snapped what I thought were a couple of discreet and anonymous street vignettes. I was not focusing on anyone in particular, just taking in the scene.

I walked onward to the main square, and passed back through the market on the way to the town's transportation stand perhaps half an hour later. I had stopped on a corner to send a quick text message, and when I looked up, I realized with a start that a dozen Shinahotans were approaching me purposefully on all sides, effectively hemming me in. In the six months I spent in Bolivia, it was the only time I felt completely vulnerable, where I had no clear sense of what was transpiring, what would happen next, and how I would handle it.

The questions were quick and to the point. What was I doing in Shinahota? Why was I taking pictures? Who was I working for? Not knowing what would be considered wrong or right answers, I stuck with the truth: I was a student from Canada, visiting the town for a day. I was in Bolivia to study . . . actually, it didn't matter what I was hoping to study. The moment I opened my mouth, it had become abundantly clear I was not Bolivian, and my interlocutors relaxed and began to disperse. Within seconds the circle surrounding me had bled away back into the busy streets. The woman who had asked the questions stayed long enough to explain that they were worried I was sent by the state tax collection agency to document who used which stalls. Then, just like that, I was alone again.

The photographs were a silly error in judgement, yet in hindsight the ensuing encounter, brief as it was, proved highly illuminating to my understanding of politics and society in the region, pushing me toward an important part of the answer to my own research puzzle. I felt the moment carried meaning as soon as it happened, but it took some time to realize how it had rendered vividly themes I had previously read and heard about elsewhere. It brought out the Chapare's tightly woven social fabric; the limited extent to which the state had penetrated the region, and rural Bolivia more generally, even to this day, with society often pushing back against those efforts;[1] the degree to which communities regulated themselves; and their capacity to mobilize quickly and effectively in response to perceived threats (García Linera, Chávez León, and Costas Monje 2004, 393–394). These topics all now feature prominently in my emerging dissertation, which focuses on the sources, mechanisms, and limits of social conflict in the region between state and society during the government's eradication campaigns under Ley 1008. Though I had read about those topics prior to my arrival in the Chapare and had heard more about them during my initial interviews, until that moment they had simply been selected

insights interspersed among mountains of other theory and data. Now they were a part, however small, of my own lived experience.

So what are the broader implications of this story for fieldwork in Latin America, and elsewhere? To me, a number of points suggest themselves. First, it underscores once again the importance, often flagged elsewhere, of just being there (e.g., Borneman and Hammoudi 2009). There is value to some form of soaking and poking, regardless of subject or method. Experiential learning is the most vivid and, for some purposes, the most effective kind there is.[2] The ethnographer, the process tracer, even the formal modeler, all benefit from seeing life in the region up close. Inevitably, some assumptions will be tested and broken, while other intuitions, previously perhaps only dimly felt, will come to the fore. The things one sees, hears, says, and does in the field shape one's understanding in ways that cannot be replicated in the classroom, or in the library, or online. We learn differently in the field; compelled to take positive action, to interact with individuals, groups, and environments in ways that we are by definition incompletely prepared for—it is not fieldwork if we are in a place where we have nothing to learn—we will inevitably make mistakes. It is also in the field that those mistakes will be thrown into the sharpest relief, making it comparatively more likely we will acknowledge and, perhaps, even learn from them.[3]

Second, it drives home the inevitability not only of acting but of doing so from a place of partial ignorance, and the particular challenge this presents to younger field researchers who inevitably are doing some on-the-job learning about context and technique. Obviously, making peace with the limits of knowledge is something that

The picture that started all the fuss. Photo by Stewart Prest.

every scholar must do. There are constraints on what is knowable, regardless of subject and methodological approach, regardless of theoretical framework, regardless of the financial and time resources available. Even so, I found that those limits were far more vividly etched in the field than in the comfort of a home office or in a research library cubicle. There is no choice but to act, to engage with the communities that one plans to study and accept that they will engage with you right back (or choose not to, in what is surely among the worst nightmares of field researchers). One need not be engaged deeply in poststructural analysis to see the value, indeed the imperative, of reflexivity in such work, an awareness of the contingent and constructed nature of the relationship between interviewer and interviewed, with all that entails for the way interviews are constructed, questions formulated, and responses interpreted and represented. Again, the more time one spends in the field, the more likely it is that one will undertake those inevitable processes of interpretation and representation in a way that is sensitive to the meanings and framings intended and possessed by research subjects, along with the motives that drive them.[4]

Third, it highlights the close interplay of preparation, serendipity, and (more) work. I would not have been in a position to make the mistake I did, and to eventually draw insight from it, had I not done considerable reading beforehand, or had I not sensitized myself to the potential readings that were possible for the event and done the work necessary to put me on a street corner in Shinahota with a camera in my hand. Likewise, the event itself in reality was only a small anecdote, something pushing me to think about life in the Chapare in a different way than I might have previously. It is not definitive evidence of anything that I study directly; indeed, it is not even directly related to my research question that is, in fact, focused on the recent past and not the present. The insights it reinforced had to be tested extensively through rigorous processes of data collection, analysis, and triangulation. It was ultimately just a signpost, and many long months of work lay both before and behind it in order to generate an evidentially supported answer to my research question.

In this sense, the example and the conclusions drawn from it capture in microcosm the larger iterative process entailed in field research. One of the hardest elements of fieldwork, particularly

in a new physical, social, or indeed a new professional or personal context, is simply to anticipate how the hard work of prior research-question formation will translate on the ground. Likewise, one never knows with certainty beforehand where the true challenges will be found. Difficulties come in such varied and unexpected forms that any purely deductive attempt to sketch out a research plan in advance, again regardless of research method, would prove insufficient. Good planning is a necessary prerequisite of effective research but is not a sufficient condition; flexibility in the field is just as important. Contrary to common stereotypes regarding different research methods—that ethnography is inductive and iterative in approach, while more quantitative and model-driven fields are deductive and deliberate—the process of research, as long as it includes an empirical referent, inevitably features an iterative cycle of deductive and inductive reasoning interspersed with observation. Whether the goal is case explanation or hypothesis testing, whether the method is qualitative or quantitative, the same steps are involved in research: plan, execute, assess, repeat. The difference between approaches is one of degree and emphasis, of sequencing, level of detail, and—to the extent that one relies on data collected and analyzed by others—outsourcing; it is not a difference of kind.

Certainly in my case the process of project definition continued after I reached the field, as I went on developing the significant but ultimately incomplete work of project formulation completed as part of an initial prospectus. While in country, I considerably refined my research question and case selection, finding better ways to frame what interested me in the context of the most relevant cases. Likewise, I gradually achieved a clearer formulation of my preferred explanation and competing

alternatives. It was only once I finally had a clear and stable sense of all of the above, along with some conception of how much of that data actually existed and was accessible given my own finite resources, that I was able to focus my energy exclusively on data collection. In short, each step overlapped with the others, and required regular updating as my understanding developed and changed over time.

Whatever else research is, it is a form of learning. By thinking broadly about that learning process and remaining open and reflexive in our approach, researchers have a better chance of achieving a result that corresponds meaningfully to what we study.

Notes

[1] The fear of state attempts to render society more legible, and consequent resistance to those efforts, sounds very much like the process described more generally by Scott (1998).

[2] This point is driven home not only in the classical formulations of Aristotle and the more modern thought of John Dewey, but also in a well-established educational research tradition associated with Kolb (1984).

[3] In political science, the literature I am most familiar with, learning shows up regularly in certain research traditions. Jervis (1976), Hall (1993), and Checkel (2005) provide diverse examples. Likewise, university-based scholars of all disciplines have embraced, however belatedly, pedagogical research in their own teaching, shaping the way courses are taught to suit the way students actually learn. Nonetheless, it is a different matter to speak of our own research as learning, to admit and explicitly incorporate mistakes and experiential learning as intrinsic elements of research methodology.

[4] Fontana (2002) provides an accessible treatment of the influence of postmodernism on contemporary interviewing techniques.

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