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What No One Told You about Doing Fieldwork in Your Country of Origin

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BY OLGA BURLYUK

Drawing on my 10+ years of experience in researching my home country while living and working abroad, this feature tells you what no methodology guide told you about doing fieldwork in your country of origin. Five sets of “issues” that may (and will) challenge you practically and emotionally come up: reverse culture shock, different work culture and gender standards, the field’s bias against you, and proximity of family and friends. Read below what finding yourself in a visitor’s

hat, the widespread use of Facebook, kissing a lady’s hand, open judgement and family rifts – among other things – have got to do with one’s “fieldwork trip home”.

When you choose to do research on – and eventually fieldwork in – your country of origin, you look for tips and tricks on how to do it best. Every qualitative methodology guide you pick up at your university’s library will tell you about the advantages of being native and the disadvantages of going native. On the plus side, you get to capitalize on understanding the context, speaking the local language(s), having a social network that might be instrumental in securing access to people or places you need for your research – and simply knowing your way around. This “default familiarity” can do wonders for your data collection and save loads of time. It might also boost your confidence upon entering the field. On the minus side, you risk letting your personal bias, your “pre-historic” opinions, assumptions and prejudices about your home country take the better of you and undermine your impartiality and objectivity towards the field. What impartiality and objectivity are supposed to be in social sciences no one knows, but most of us are still being told – and still tell the young – to pursue these as somehow virtuous. Because subjectivity is considered very bad for data analysis.

For a moment there, you may find yourself trapped between the two conflicting dogmas of qualitative research: only a local/an outsider [cross out the unnecessary word] is capable of saying anything valuable about a context. If all goes well, your research supervisor, tutor or mentor will then tell you that the magic key to doing good research on one’s country of origin is no different from the magic key to doing any good research: reflect on your positioning, acknowledge your bias(es) and keep a critical mind at all costs. Be professional and keep yourself and your work to a high standard; it is as simple as that.

What you are unlikely to hear from anyone while preparing for your “fieldwork trip home”, however, is that you may be (dramatically) overestimating the familiarity of the field and that this field – your home – may and will also have biases against you. The effect of these on you and your research is significant, even if less spoken about. It is not only you doing things during fieldwork: fieldwork is also doing things to you.

I write this piece in an effort to share insights from my 10+ years of experience doing research

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subject for a group of graduate students at the Central European University last month that I came to realize one cannot easily read up on this. I believe some thoughts and warnings from my practical experience, however partial and incomplete, can be extremely helpful for graduate students and young researchers, as well as their supervisors. I know I wish someone had told me this back in my day!

I have grouped my observations in five categories of “challenges”: reverse culture shock and the tricky insider/outsider positioning, different work culture and professional ethic, different gender standards and expectations, people’s opinion of you and your current position vis-à-vis the field, and proximity of family and friends. I discuss these one by one below.

First of all, at the most general level, brace yourself for a reverse culture shock, the intensity of which may vary depending on how long you have been residing abroad and the degree of contrast between the countries of origin and residence. You may find certain practices less obvious, intuitive or common-sense than you did before. You may also catch yourself (un)comfortably settled in an observer role more than an insider you may have initially expected (or hoped!) to be; a visitor more than a home-comer. In my personal experience, the longer I am out of the country and the older I get, the more I come to Ukraine as an observer – and the less traumatic it is to admit to myself that I am one.

Second, depending on whether you have previously worked in the work culture and professional ethic you get to deal with in your fieldwork, you may either have little idea about it, or struggle to fit in, or both. In many instances, freshly-graduated students move abroad for education in graduate and doctoral schools without ever having worked in their home countries. And so assuming knowledgeability about professional life in one’s country of origin may be a bad idea. Here, I refer to fundamentals like spoken and unspoken hierarchies (which one usually gets a taste of as a student, but nonetheless) as well as mundane things like dress code, preferred means of communication, people scheduling meetings long in advance or last minute, and so on. It is best that you comprehend such things prior to your field trip; if you don’t, it is essential that you adapt quickly. To illustrate this better: by virtue of my research on cooperation between Ukraine and the European Union, Kyiv (the capital of Ukraine) and Brussels (the seat of EU headquarters) are my two major sites for fieldwork, and political elites are my main “population”. Now, the work culture in the two cities is completely different. In Brussels, I ought to contact people by email and well in advance so as to schedule a meeting for a specific time slot months away. In Kyiv, I often contact people by email long before my field trip only to get a brisk reply with the person’s cell phone number or, better yet, Facebook name (“classified information” I would rarely get a hold of in Brussels!) and an invitation to be in touch via this or that App once I am actually in town. As a popular Ukrainian joke has it, “6 months is long-term in Ukraine”: things tend to change quickly, and planning months ahead has no point. And even though I had worked in Ukraine for two years prior to commencing my PhD abroad, I was still somewhat surprised by this on my first field trip to Ukraine.

Third, depending on the countries involved, gender standards and expectations in your country of origin and fieldwork might differ from those in your current country of residence and work (and which you may now hold as a reference). This point is relevant for men and women alike; but possible discrepancies in gender standards for women are arguably more drastic than they are for men. In my case, the relationship between femininity and professionalism is seen differently in Ukraine than it is in Belgium (where I’ve lived for the past 10 years) in that the demand for femininity – and the threshold of tolerance for sexism – appears to be much higher in Ukraine, also in professional settings. I remember deliberately buying myself high-heeled shoes and a laptop-size leather handbag “to look decent and be taken at all serious” on one of my early field trips to Ukraine: flat shoes and a backpack would simply not do the trick. Or I would enter a room imagining myself a “Dr Burlyuk”, a serious academic, and instead my interviewee would greet me with an “Olichka”, which is the diminutive for Olga and is utterly inappropriate at my age and in this context. Or a man would act excessively “gallant”, kissing my hand when I’d only extended it for shaking. These are anecdotal examples, of course, but they do illustrate the point: different gender standards may repeatedly startle you (as they do with me); or you may feel “treated like a woman for



confront.

Fourth, you may be pleasantly or unpleasantly surprised to discover what people think of you, your current position and your research. Your own view of your “connection to the field” may be in or out of tune with that of the people in the field. Over the years, I have encountered a wide range of reactions to my person and my research: from admiration of my “having secured” a scholarship/position abroad, to appreciation for my research and genuine curiosity about it, to jealousy, despise and outright judgement of me and what I am seen to represent (that is: a traitor of the country who has abandoned the sinking ship). Likewise, while you are likely to see yourself as an insider of the context you are studying (especially compared to foreign colleagues researching your country of origin), people in the field may well consider you an outsider – for you are out now, aren’t you? Without trying to generalize the ungeneralizable here, at the very least, beware of the possibility of being judged or otherwise rejected: it may come as a heavy blow, and you ought to prepare for it mentally and practically (e.g. what would you reply in a situation like this or that without jeopardizing your interview?).

Last but not least, depending on whether you will be staying with or close to family, relatives and friends (and depending on how often you visit them otherwise), be prepared to fend off some of their enthusiasm and set up a clear separation between the work part and the private part of your trip – or juggle the two continuously. While seeing your loved ones may be an upside of a field trip, it may also be a downside, especially in situations of a family rift or possessive relatives. Either way, it is an extra emotional load to carry. Having done fieldwork in Brussels, Washington DC and other sites outside my country of origin, I can honestly say: fieldwork in Ukraine is always a more emotionally charged undertaking for me, for all of the above reasons and more.

I have no intention of submitting the points raised in this brief essay as universal: just as my experience, they are subjective, partial and incomplete. Yet I believe it is important to break the silence and get the conversation going. My main piece of advice for preparing for fieldwork, also and especially if you are going to your country of origin, is this: prepare. Take as little as possible for granted. And solicit advice from people who might know better.

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