

Fieldwork in Familiar Places: The UGA Workshop in Fieldwork Methods

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Fieldwork schools typically take place in distant, often exotic settings, far from instructors' home base. The University of Georgia (UGA) Summer Workshop in Fieldwork Methods, a project led by an interdisciplinary faculty at the UGA, summers 1992–95, reversed this pattern by bringing graduate students and postdoctoral scholars from colleges and universities in the United States and nearby countries to our home turf. Bringing strangers to our own backyards, we discovered, was something like holding a mirror before our faces. The reflection gave us a new perspective on who we were, what our surroundings were like, and how we related to one another.

Program Structure

The workshop provided intensive fieldwork training to students in graduate programs that included little or no hands-on experience in fieldwork. Over a four-year period the program provided fieldwork training for about sixty graduate students—about one-third ethnic minorities and more than half women—and a few postdoctoral scholars educated in other research traditions but wanting to learn fieldwork methods to address current research needs.

In attempting to transform fieldwork training into a more structured experience we faced several challenges: locating sites for appropriate practice, providing sufficient expert guidance and mentoring, allowing time for introspection and reflection so crucial to self-conscious practice, and shielding research participants and their organizations in discussions more public than apprenticeships require. We also hoped to encourage

novices to use a broader range of theoretical and conceptual frameworks than commonly occurs in one-to-one apprenticeships.

The four-and-one-half-week program had three core elements: an individual fieldwork project, carried out with the guidance of a faculty mentor; seminar sessions to discuss readings done before and during the workshop and to interact with guest speakers whose research modeled varying approaches to qualitative research;¹ and informal interchanges among participants. The latter ranged from organized discussion groups on topics of mutual interest, such as the politics of writing a fieldwork dissertation or feminist and Afrocentric approaches to research, to walks through the woods or evening forays in search of Athens's next "undiscovered" alternative rock band.

The central faculty (Grant, Preissle, and Fine for the duration; Beoku-Betts in years one and two and Finlay in years three and four) all consider ourselves to be ethnographers, though we all practice ethnography in different ways. Preissle is trained in educational ethnography, and Beoku-Betts's first degree is in sociology and social anthropology; the rest of us are ethnographically inclined sociologists. Beoku-Betts held a formal cross appointment in women's studies, and Grant and Preissle are adjunct women's studies faculty as well. All of us, in our own work, write for interdisciplinary audiences and write collaboratively with scholars in other fields.

For many students the informal sharing of ideas was the most important component. Discussions with peers, which developed out of fieldwork experience and seminar sessions, helped to solidify their identities as fieldworkers. These informal interchanges helped to forge a community of young scholars who still communicate frequently via email, collaborate on work, reunite at professional meetings, and otherwise support one another through graduate and early career years. As one participant wrote on postworkshop evaluations, her workshop experience led her to "understand why she had become a qualitative researcher" and enabled her to "articulate this to others." Another wrote that although she had worked with a fine mentor and outstanding fieldworker at her home institution, "I've never had the opportunity to work with a group of peers who are qualitative researchers or to experience the surge of energy and creativity that can occur in that environment. I now feel as if I am a member of a national cohort, an intellectual community on which I can rely for years to come." Professional networks of young fieldworkers initiated at the workshop have extended the program's influence as other scholars have joined the discussions about writing, research ethics, seeking funding for qualitative research, and teaching field methods initiated by workshop alumni in email interchanges and conference panels.

We believe the program to have been successful, with more than 95 percent of participants saying they would enroll in it again and recommend it to a peer with similar interests. However, it was not problem free.

Many of our difficulties stemmed from what we initially thought would be the easiest part of the venture: its location in the community where we lived and worked.

With the challenge of welcoming 15 strangers a year and helping them settle into temporary housing and fieldwork, it was not until well into year two that we were able to articulate in intellectual terms what we were trying to do. Table 1, developed by Judith Preissle, portrays the recursive, interconnected nature of the fieldwork process which we hoped to convey to participants. We wanted to clarify that we would not be offering a guidebook of how to do fieldwork right, much to the chagrin of some participants who had been trained primarily in other forms of research. Instead, we used the table as a heuristic to portray the emergent,

Table 1.
Interwoven strands addressed throughout the UGA workshop.

Experiencing Research

- You and the research process
- Role, teams, or individuals
- Developing research design
- Adapting, combining, or innovating methods

Contextualizing Research

- Who and where you are studying
- Diversities by gender, race, ethnicity, class, age, sexual orientation, religion, etc.
- Social organization and cultural variation
- Access, entry, field relationships

Conducting Research

- How information is collected and analyzed
- Tools and techniques, computers and other technologies

Justifying Research

- Why the research is being done
- Purposes, tacit and manifest
- Ethics and values
- Stakeholders
- Funding
- Applied and action research
- Collaborative arrangements

Conceptualizing Research

- What you want to know and how to explain, predict, understand, and interpret it
- Sociocultural theories and philosophical orientations
- All the "isms": feminism, Afrocentrism, postmodernism, and other frames

Assessing Research

- How good is this work?

interconnected nature of fieldwork and to illustrate the overlaps between the processes involved in producing it: formulating, justifying, contextualizing, experiencing, managing, and assessing the quality of ethnographic and fieldwork research. Everything we did—formally and informally—touched on these themes, though some were more prominent at times than others. On days when we retained our senses of humor, we could see how even our blunders, struggles, and missteps as faculty mentors helped to portray fieldwork as a semicontrolled, decidedly nonlinear process.

In this short and intensive program, many of the problems revolved around boundaries, competition, and the discovery of one's fieldwork self. We review here challenges we faced, some of which we met successfully and others we did not.

Unexpected Participants

We began the program with a certain group of participants in mind: graduate students with some knowledge of research methods and perhaps an introductory course but little experience with direct fieldwork. We expected most would be from sociology, anthropology, education, or closely related disciplines. We did all we could to encourage a multiculturally diverse group of applicants, and we recruited a multicultural group of faculty and guest researchers. Our intention was to include people with different perspectives and varying approaches to the fieldwork craft.

Pleasingly, our applicant pools included all of these and more. We were particularly surprised to see among applicants advanced doctoral students who worked with well-known fieldworkers at other institutions. What could they possibly hope to learn from us? We also had applicants from a broader range of disciplines than anticipated, including public health, theology, medical ethics, psychology, ecology, administrative science, and political science, plus applicants from sociology and education whose prior training had been mostly in quantitative analysis.

The first year we placed all students in fieldwork settings, prearranged by workshop faculty in and around Athens. A clumsy-sounding process, it operated remarkably well in most cases. Students worked in settings such as courts and legal aid offices; social service agencies; radio stations; newspaper and academic journal editorial offices; educational, cultural, and religious organizations; and sports, recreational, and youth theater organizations. Participants spent many hours in fieldwork settings, gathering and analyzing data and working with mentors and the other four students assigned to each mentor to craft an analysis.

An invaluable experience for novices, the fieldwork experience was redundant for students further along in dissertation work. Most of them came to Athens with data in hand and hoping to work on analysis and writing. To accommodate their needs, in the second year we created a separate experience, led by Preissle. When the first-time fieldworkers

headed for their research sites, the analysis group spent more solitary hours coding, analyzing, and writing up their data, then sharing and critiquing drafts. An error we made in year two—labeling this group the “advanced” group rather than the “analysis” group and thereby implying an unintended hierarchy based on intellectual worth rather than work stage—was corrected in year three. We tried to curb the tendency of some students more experienced in fieldwork to dominate seminar sessions and to reduce informal barriers separating fieldwork and analysis groups—until we were gently reminded by participants that they were adults and could handle their own social calendars!²

In most years’ workshop groups, however, positive ties began to form at the opening night party, given at the home of one of the faculty mentors. Throwing a good party, we discovered, was just as essential to success as providing an intellectually coherent agenda. The workshop ended each year with another informal party.

Errors (and Recoveries) in Fieldwork Placements

Because of the program’s short duration, concerns of the Institutional Review (Human Subjects) Board, and the difficulties of negotiating a field site in a town when one has just arrived for the first time, we preferred to arrange fieldwork settings in advance. In our regular-term fieldwork classes, students typically find and negotiate access to settings on their own. In the workshop program we were placing students about whom we knew very little in settings with people we sometimes knew quite well. Finding multiple field settings in the slow summer months in Athens required us to draw heavily from our networks, personal and professional, leaving faculty in the not-so-comfortable position of having participants observe our relatives, close friends, partners or ex-partners, and colleagues. These arrangements engendered a heightened sense on the part of faculty of what subjects go through when a researcher invades their personal space. We also acquired a set of informal obligations that we are still repaying. These overlaps of our personal and professional lives also maximized embarrassment for faculty in the few cases in which participants acted badly, failed to fulfill promises, or, in one case, generated a fieldwork report that angered a colleague.

We also made some mismatches in fieldwork settings, owing to our limited information about both settings and participants. A Civil War reenactment group in which members spent more time in bars than on the battlefield proved to be a poor site for a participant who had once struggled with an alcohol problem. A children’s sports camp was an equally inappropriate choice for a newly divorced woman eager to spend her first summer ever away from her young children. (She had not told us about her children, fearing that this might prejudice her application.) What participants had not told faculty (strangers) about compounded errors in fieldwork placements but provided valuable lessons about the links between oneself and one’s role as a fieldworker.

Underinvolvement: Nothing Is Going On

Other field settings proved unworkable for other reasons. A therapy clinic whose staff welcomed a researcher had an excruciatingly slow schedule during the summer, and the student assigned to it got to observe carpenters renovating the building and therapists killing time. She coped brilliantly by writing an engaging report, "The Field Setting that Wasn't." Another had a similar experience with a campus policing unit, until he focused on the strategies officers used to look busy and deserving of their paychecks in the slow summer weeks. This was not far afield, he realized at the end of his fieldwork, from his central interest in organizational processes.

Placed in a recreational program that was too structured for the observations of informal peer interactions she had hoped to study, another student went searching and found a far more interesting site: a beauty salon that functioned as a lay social service agency for women escaping violent relationships. With advice from her mentor group, she negotiated a graceful withdrawal from the first site and went on to focus on the connection between beauty and empowerment among women in these circumstances. Paralleling the empowerment achieved by subjects she observed, her confidence that she could complete a fieldwork dissertation, despite the skepticism of some of her graduate committee members, was bolstered by her experience.

Overinvolvement: Everything Is Fascinating

Other students became very engrossed in their fieldwork settings at first sight and wrestled instead with the danger of various forms of overinvolvement. One participant was so angered by a social agency's treatment of clients of her minority group that she could barely stand to stay in the setting for the workshop's duration. Another observed a youth theater group and became a close confidant of several young actors. He and they experienced distress when the workshop ended and prior commitments required that he leave Athens before they opened the show they had rehearsed all summer—and counted on him to see. One woman realized the need to deflect romantic overtures from an agency worker when it became clear that these angered his boss—also his former girlfriend—and jeopardized the fieldworker's access to the setting. A participant who gained instant rapport with staff of a local radio station became so wrapped up in their invitation to train her as an on-air disc jockey that she nearly forgot her intention to study *them*. One young man agonized over what to do when he genuinely liked leaders of a youth project but believed their program harmed more than hurt the minority youth it intended to serve. Another wondered how to respond when the leader of a youth group asked him to accompany him to a nude dancing club. Working through these issues in the context of the seminar and mentor groups helped each of the students decide what to do but also

helped the group as a whole appreciate the intrinsic connection between self and fieldwork that for many had seemed abstract. Faculty did not always agree on an appropriate response to these dilemmas, opening new dialogues among us.

How a participant responded to these fieldwork dilemmas often functioned as a self-reflexive test of whether or not he or she really wanted to do fieldwork. Each year a few participants, even those who had no particular difficulties in the field, decided that they probably did not want to become fieldworkers. Noting on her evaluation that faculty "should not look on this as a failure," one woman wrote that she had decided that fieldwork was not for her: "I do not like the degree of exposure of self necessary in fieldwork, and I don't want to spend the time in graduate school that it would take for me to write a qualitative dissertation. These were important things for me to learn before embarking on one."

Relationships with Mentors

Boundary issues cropped up not only in field relationships but also in relationships with mentors. We discovered that some participants came to the program at points of transition in their lives, and they sought holistic guidance from mentors on personal as well as professional issues. Mentors responded in various ways to these demands. While we had designed the program to provide close ties between mentors and participants, we had to avoid inappropriate roles and those beyond our expertise. These included intervention in disputes at home institutions or service as therapists. All the faculty had dealt with similar situations with UGA students, but in most of these cases we could make referrals in the local community for further help. This was harder to do with short-term visitors. And like sibling rivals, some of our UGA students resented the fact that the workshop consumed our days for its duration and left us minimally available to them. What right did these strangers have to claim the mentors' time? Workshop participants in one group one year were distressed about the unexpected absence of their mentor for several days. In retrospect, we should have anticipated such an occurrence and had a better backup plan. Many mentoring relationships lasted far beyond the workshop, to the mutual benefit of both parties but at the cost of overextension of some of the mentors some of the time. Some participants had not worked before with a minority scholar, a woman, a fieldworker with similar substantive interests, or a fieldworker of any sort and continued to rely on workshop faculty for professional advice, mentoring, and recommendations for jobs, fellowships, and awards.

Competition and Marginality

For reasons that are unclear, members of the second and fourth workshops were decidedly more competitive with one another than participants

in other years. Competition should not have been surprising among a group of talented, highly motivated participants with impressive credentials, but we had not wholly expected it. Furthermore, as faculty we had never explicitly shared with one another our values regarding competition in the classroom. We sometimes found ourselves working at cross purposes in seminar sessions, with some attempting to reduce and others attempting to fan competition. These discrepancies flowed from honest disagreements about pedagogy. Was competition a stressful distraction from scholarly work, or were no-holds-barred debates a valuable means for sharpening ideas and clarifying perspectives?

Because most of the faculty involved in the workshop are self-taught or had learned via the apprentice model and had not explicitly discussed approaches to fieldwork with one another, defining objectives was sometimes a struggle for us. We did not always concur on what represented high-quality fieldwork, nor did we always agree on what constituted appropriate technical or ethical practices in conducting fieldwork. Guest researchers frequently presented even wider ranges of perspectives on these issues. Traditional forms of instruction had never forced us to confront these differences so directly. The venture thus proved to be a creative challenge for faculty beyond typical course preparation and an *in situ* example for all participants that not all fieldworkers think alike.

For participants competition was especially uncomfortable for high-achieving students previously trained in quantitative methods. They were grappling already with the discomfiting fluidity and unpredictability of fieldwork and the lack of a clear guidebook for “doing fieldwork right.” When others seemed to be getting ahead of them—establishing rapport more readily or interviewing key informants first—these group members became anxious. They seemed to have a love/hate relationship with fieldwork, attracted to its potential to address issues impossible to study with quantitative approaches but distressed by its seeming lack of form and predictable pace. Tales of setbacks recounted by mentors, guest researchers, and other participants were helpful in easing these tensions. Many of these quantitatively trained participants ultimately did fine fieldwork and found that, once initiated, they also enjoyed its rhythm.

The diversity among participants was a decided benefit for the program, but it could also be a source of tension. Participants came from different types of institutions—elite and prestigious to small and little known—and represented a variety of ethnic groups and academic disciplines. This sometimes led to posturing and status contests with some students competing for “floor time” and some participants marginalized in the process. In some workshops, careful moderation of seminar sessions to insure equitable participation, combined with mentors’ private encouragement of more timid students, improved the situation. It also helped to bring sessions on topics such as Afrocentric and feminist approaches to research—subjects of optional sessions in year one—into

seminar sessions and to invite more guest researchers who addressed these themes to identify the issues as core, and not tangential, to the process of fieldwork and the appreciation of connections between self and the research process. While most participants responded favorably to these changes, some indicated on evaluations that such materials remained for them irrelevant or even forced.

We encouraged participants to become reflexive about issues of dominance and marginalization, considering how these issues might play out in their field settings. The presence of a greater-than-token number of minority participants brought distinctive insights into the process of learning fieldwork. A black woman's account of being closely followed by a manager in a local store and other minority participants' reports that this was a frequent experience for them helped a white participant see how blacks were subtly discriminated against in her setting. The enrollment of a much larger proportion of Spanish-speaking participants than attend UGA overall, and their frequent use of their language skills in fieldwork settings, made us aware that the Latino population of the local area was much larger than city or university officials realized.

Minority and nonminority students commented on evaluations that working in a multicultural program was a highpoint of the workshop experience for them. One wrote, "Multicultural approaches to teaching and research are often discussed, but rarely modeled. This has been a very valuable experience." Faculty experienced firsthand the benefits of a richly diverse educational experience. Many of us became more vocal advocates of efforts to insure diversity in all domains of university life and less receptive to claims that it was impossible to recruit a multiculturally diverse faculty or student body in a small southern city. We hope that most participants left with a sense that UGA would be a good place to work once they finish their degrees.

Conclusion

Despite the challenges of the program, and the sheer exhaustion of the faculty at the conclusion of its fourth and final year, the workshop proved to be a valuable learning experience that continues to pay dividends to faculty and students who took part. Students left with a realistic understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of fieldwork and a sense of how well fieldwork fit their research projects and their research selves. They sampled from a rich menu of fieldwork approaches and techniques and had a chance to think through creative syntheses of research approaches, in most cases before embarking on major research projects such as dissertations. They met skilled and energetic peers with whom they initiated professional networks that continue to prosper and grow. They learned firsthand some of the challenges they would face as researchers and teachers related to theoretical and ethical concerns in fieldwork. Many began to think through how they would teach a fieldwork methods course. Even the few who did not envision themselves

doing more fieldwork told us they had gained an appreciation for fieldwork approaches that they believed would enhance their effectiveness as teachers, mentors, and evaluators of fieldwork research.

Collectively, the workshop alumni have compiled an admirable record of accomplishment. They have produced an impressive number of publications and professional presentations, and those who have finished their degrees have done well in the job market. Nearly one-third have offered qualitative courses or taught new qualitative components in general methods courses in sociology or education and in courses as diverse as business ethics, journalistic practice, and women's studies. Most of the rest hope to teach fieldwork in the future. The workshop experience thus contributed not only to the professional development of fieldwork researchers but also to the preparation of a new generation of fieldwork teachers.

For faculty as well the benefits of the program have been multiple. We have come to know and appreciate one another's approaches to fieldwork, and the workshop has been the genesis of interdisciplinary collaborations on this campus around research and teaching. Most of us have modified the content or pedagogy of our undergraduate and graduate fieldwork courses in light of the workshop experience. The workshop helped strengthen our ties to national and international networks of fieldworkers in many disciplines, whose students we have met through their participation in the program. All these activities have contributed to our professional growth. We are recommitted to the importance of hands-on field experience in methods courses—even if academic climates work against small classes and even if field projects cannot be fully realized within the time constraints of an academic term—and to multicultural teaching ventures—even if political support for them is eroding.

Aspects of the workshop program can be adapted to other programs and locales. While the valuable context of peer groups diverse in experience, free from most other obligations, but committed to a common enterprise might be difficult to duplicate in regular-term fieldwork courses, mentor groups to provide social support, practical advice, and hands-on fieldwork could easily be incorporated into regular-course teaching. Allowing students to find and negotiate access to their field settings would make the experience even more realistic. Involving guest researchers from many disciplines, especially those who use new or nonmainstream approaches, could also be used to enrich fieldwork teaching and make students aware of other resources available locally.

The UGA program ended in summer 1995, and the Olympic games in Athens in 1996 made scheduling a workshop impossible. We hope at some point to revive the workshop with secure funding to replace our initial grant from the National Science Foundation, and we are considering a collaboration among several colleges and universities in the state. Perhaps next time we will consider an exotic locale.

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Notes

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1. We will be happy to share copies of advance readings, workshop syllabi, and the names of our valuable, but greatly undercompensated, guest researchers on request. Guests came from UGA or nearby universities and illustrated forms of research different from the participant-observation and interview studies that dominated the work of most workshop faculty.

2. The sociologists among us were sometimes teased by colleagues for running "Camp Fieldwork"—especially when each year's collaboratively designed, custom-made T-shirts arrived.