

# Fieldwork in Political Science: Encountering Challenges and Crafting Solutions

## Introduction

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Whether the aim is to build theory or test hypotheses, junior and senior political scientists alike face problems collecting data in the field. Most field researchers have expectations of the challenges they will face, and also some training and preparation for addressing these challenges. Yet, in hindsight many wish they had been better prepared—both psychologically and logistically—for the difficulties they encountered. The central theme of this symposium is precisely these data collection problems political scientists face in the field and how to deal with them.

The articles in this symposium are written by young scholars—PhD candidates and recent PhDs—who have spent considerable time in the field collecting qualitative and quantitative data for their dissertations and book manuscripts. The separate perspectives presented here contextualize particular challenges of data collection in different world regions within the trajectory of single research projects. The articles trace the challenges that analysts faced in field sites as varied as China, Germany, India, Kazakhstan, and Mexico. Describing the realities of fieldwork and resourceful strategies for dealing with them, this symposium sheds new light on several practical aspects of fieldwork in political science. The symposium also brings together scholars who used multiple research methods, thereby illuminating the difficulties encountered in political science fieldwork from diverse angles. For this reason, these vignettes are relevant to researchers focusing on both qualitative and quantitative research methods.

There have been a few notable forays into the topic of fieldwork in political science, such as the symposia in the 2006 *APSA Qualitative and Multi-Methods Research Newsletter*, the April 2009 issue of *PS: Political Science and Politics*, as well as Kapiszewski et al.'s forthcoming book *Fieldwork in Political Science*. However, there is still a limited literature on fieldwork in political science that offers more than generalized advice and provides sufficient examples of ways to address problems that occur during the early, middle, and final stages of research projects. Most of the existing writing on fieldwork focuses on the planning stage and the transition from a research design to a data collection strategy. More discussion is needed of the problems that occur while in the field, whether they involve the complex dilemmas researchers face when negotiating the politics of identity, developing relationships with informants and respondents, or thoughts on how fieldwork findings can lead to a fundamental change in the focus of a project.

### RESEARCHER IDENTITY

The first challenge addressed by the articles concerns how a researcher's identity shapes and constrains the quality of the data that can be collected. While researchers' identities are examined widely in both the anthropological and sociological literatures, it is seldom addressed in political science. The contributions to this symposium by Suzanne Scoggins and Vasundhara Sirnate capture the ways in which gender, age, ethnicity, and race influenced their experiences of gathering interview and participant observation data. Scoggins spent years studying and working in China before embarking on fieldwork for her research project about policing practices; nevertheless, her ability to implement her research design at first seemed limited by her status as an outsider: a Caucasian woman with no professional experience in policing. Scoggins shares how she transformed her outsider status from a liability into an asset by using strategies that maximized opportunities. Social networking, diverse and dynamic interview settings, and nuanced language use enabled her to

navigate informant expectations and collect data on politically sensitive topics.

Sirnate details how she managed her identity as a female researcher of a particular class, caste, and ethnicity during her fieldwork studying counterinsurgency strategies in India. Working in a patriarchal society, she found that informants were often put off by her presence as a woman traveling without male companions. People she encountered expressed a range of

participation of teachers' unions. He outlines the problems he encountered collecting different types of data and describes the "workarounds" he took to overcome them. He emphasizes the importance of sequencing research activities to minimize costs in time and resources and developing extensive relationships with data brokers such as gatekeepers, organic intellectuals, local academics, and veteran field researchers to gain access to data.

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behaviors including aggression, hostility, incomprehension, and protectiveness on meeting her. To protect herself and access informants, Sirnate actively tried to give the male insurgents and soldiers roles as her "friends, protectors, and guides." By strategically shaping her relationships with those she encountered, she was able to obtain more honest answers to her questions and avoid dangerous situations.

#### COLLECTING QUANTITATIVE DATA

Political scientists often associate fieldwork with qualitative methods. But many original datasets, particularly those in developing countries, are the product of painstaking data gathering using strategies not unfamiliar to qualitative researchers. The second challenge addressed by the articles in this symposium is the collection of quantitative data and how techniques associated with qualitative research can be used to get hard-to-access quantitative data. Although texts about political science methodology often talk about the importance of gathering reliable quantitative data, the actual process of collecting this data is, for the most part, neglected in the literature. Francesca Refsum Jensenius and Christopher Chambers-Ju discuss this challenge in their articles. Quantitative data that was supposed to be publicly available was often hard to locate, not available across all cases or time periods, or asymmetric in that different types of data were available at different levels of analysis.

For her study on the effects of electoral quotas in India, Jensenius spent more than a year collecting data for quantitative datasets that would allow her to study the actions of politicians and capture local level overtime variation in the delivery of various public goods. The challenge lay in the many logistical and bureaucratic difficulties of accessing the necessary data, as well as in the uneven data quality. To access data and assess their quality, Jensenius tracked multiple data sources, related to gatekeepers and data managers with respect, patience, and persistence, and partnered with local colleagues. She found that discussions of gaining entry and building rapport—familiar to us in the ethnographic literature—were also highly relevant for her fieldwork collecting quantitative data.

Over a fifteen-month period, Chambers-Ju visited Colombia, Argentina, and Mexico to conduct research on the electoral

#### RE-CRAFTING A RESEARCH PROJECT

Fieldwork often leads scholars to reassess or fundamentally shift their core research questions. The third set of problems addressed in this symposium is how to re-craft a research project when prior expectations about the field do not pan out. Researchers may find that their original research questions are not appropriate for the cases they have selected, or that their proposed data collection strategy is not viable. The articles by Akasemi Newsome and Jody LaPorte highlight how data collection in multiple field sites forced them to rethink the core questions and outcomes of interest in their dissertations. They explain how they successfully reformulated the scope and design of their research during their fieldwork, while also generating new hypotheses for their adjusted projects.

Newsome's initial research question was why European trade unions varied in their responses to immigration flows after World War II. However, during her fieldwork, she faced the challenge of collecting equivalent and sufficient data to effectively answer the original research question in Denmark, Germany, and the United Kingdom. After realizing it was impossible to consistently collect data across the multiple indicators she would need in all three of her country cases, she decided to change her outcome of interest to one more modest in scope. Newsome's article details the analytical process by which she retooled her dissertation research design, including changing some of her cases, to accommodate her new, narrower dependent variable of cross-ethnic cooperation in union protests. Key to transitioning to a new research question was the use of substantive and temporal thresholds at regular intervals while in the field.

Also challenged by empirical realities, LaPorte modified her research by broadening her initial, narrow question of the causes of protests in the post-Soviet regimes in Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Belarus. In preparation for fieldwork, she created a database of several hundred protests across her cases between 2002 and 2004. She planned to locate politicians and protesters who had been active in the incidents comprising her dataset in the field. Her interviews with informants, however, revealed that the time period her database covered was exceptional; there were broader political dynamics that were more interesting. Adjusting her research questions,

recording new observations in regular structured memos, frequently consulting her advisers, and switching cases enabled LaPorte to expand her project's scope to explaining variation in the governing strategies pursued by wealth-seeking rulers in post-Soviet countries.

Through this collection of articles, we offer lessons for both researchers who are undertaking fieldwork and those who are

of how problems may unfold and to provide examples of a range of different solutions. The highlighted complexities and practical solutions each researcher brought to bear showcase the iterative and often inductive process that enables political scientists to discover interesting puzzles. By highlighting the challenges of data collection and showing some of the paths that can be taken to address them,

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training others preparing to go to the field. A common thread in this symposium is that challenges in the field are unpredictable and not easily anticipated in advance. To address them researchers must be creative and flexible. It is also important to keep in mind the ways in which a researcher's identity can both create problems and serve as the key to solving them. Conducting fieldwork can be made easier by sharing experiences and providing ideas on how to maximize research resources and take advantage of opportunities. This symposium explicitly connects problems encountered on the ground to solutions.

In these articles, we chose to err on the side of specificity rather than general applicability to show multiple examples

we hope to embolden others to pursue the rigors and joys of fieldwork, an experience we all found to be mentally and physically demanding, but also intellectually stimulating, exciting, and fun.

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