

# Graduate Student Field Work Forum, Fall 2012

The Center for African Studies hosted a Fieldwork Forum on 28 September 2012, in which graduate students shared experiences with field research in various African countries. Their academic concentrations ranged from Anthropology to Energy and Resources to Performance Studies. Their research practices included archival research, participatory observation, ethnographic research methods, and quantitative data research, among others. Field work countries included Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and also Brazil and the United Kingdom.

The research experience will depend on the researcher, the location and environment, and the subject. Here, we share some common points of advice and reflections from the graduate students' experiences from fieldwork focused on Sub-Saharan Africa:

1. Ethics Concerns with Human Subjects
  - a. The Committee for Protection of Human Subjects (CPHS) understands that you may unavoidably encounter children (or have unexpected interviews) during your research. CPHS's concern is what you will do with this information, especially regarding publishing without proper consent. When you submit your proposals to CPHS, it is best to acknowledge this and state what you will or will not do with the data.
  - b. Although human subjects should be anonymous, you may encounter times where it would be unethical to treat them as such. For example, a graduate researcher studied a group of public figures who did not want to be anonymous. The researcher ended up using the individuals' nicknames in her publication.
  - c. Be careful with electronic publishing of media, as most cameras now keep GPS coordinates encrypted in the file.
2. Professionalism
  - a. Wear a conservative suit and carry business cards to government offices and archives. Treat officials and librarians with the upmost respect, because you will leave a legacy for future researchers.
  - b. Do not be afraid to use the UC Berkeley name when asking for documents. Officials and archivists will recognize the name and be more willing to help you if they have more faith in your academic institution.
3. Networking
  - a. Arriving in a foreign country can be daunting. Utilize your professors' and colleagues' connections in order to have set contacts before you arrive.
  - b. Network and meet up with other researchers in the area. You can share stories and discuss similar concerns. This will help soften potential loneliness or homesickness
4. Use of Electronics
  - a. Smartphones are incredibly popular and less conspicuous than a "reporter's notebook." If you are doing participatory research, it may be more convenient to take field notes on your smartphone.



- b. Although electronic devices are convenient, be sure to have a backup in case they break. Also be aware of potential power outages and theft. Keep paper copies and notes.
5. Budget and Money
- a. Budget for more expensive but reliable transportation. Daylight hours can be short depending on the season or location of your field research. In cases such as these, paying for expensive but quicker and more dependable transportation will allow you to spend additional time in the field and provide a measure of safety.
  - b. Expect the unexpected such as theft of laptops or an unexpected need to fly home to deal with family emergencies. Have contingency plans.
  - c. Before you leave, inform your bank and credit card company that you will be traveling, when and where.
6. The Question of Assimilation
- a. Especially in participatory observation, you may be urged to become a part of what you're studying. One student ran for a student government. If these situations arise, discuss them carefully with your research advisers to figure out the best course of action.
  - b. When your field research spans over a long period of time, you will form close relationships with the people you observe. Assaults, deaths, and other personal tragedies could occur. Blurring the line between being a researcher and being a friend could be difficult.
  - c. With the accessibility of social networking sites, there is a high chance the people you are observing will want to be Facebook friends, Twitter followers, or LinkedIn Connections. It's important to maintain an image of an impartial researcher, and having your human subjects know personal information could compromise your relationship. You can make your social profiles private.
7. Health, Safety and Personal Risk
- a. As is common when travelling or living in any foreign country, you may be recognized as an outsider. This puts you at a higher risk of robbery or assault. Others may also try to bribe you. Before and after arriving in the country, network with others to see how to diffuse or avoid potentially dangerous situations.
  - b. Avoid drinking too much. In some settings, it may be all too easy. In addition to the health issues, you may end up behaving foolishly.
  - c. See bibliography on sexual harassment and violence in the context of field work.
8. Changing Your Research
- a. What you prepare for at home is different from what you encounter in the field. Even if you receive permission to go to a village or to look at state documents beforehand, you may be denied the opportunity on arrival. You should attempt to compromise, but also know when to move on. In these cases, look for other opportunities, especially with other researchers in the area.