



When the Field Is Home: Conducting Research in One's Country of Origin

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When I attended the Institute on Qualitative Research Methods (IQRM) in preparation for my fieldwork in Germany, I discovered that my plans to "go home" to conduct research were by no means unique.¹ In fact, it seemed that most international graduate students had selected their country of origin as at least one of their dissertation case studies. In conversation with them and after reviewing the literature on field research, it became clear that there was very little advice to be found for our situation – overwhelmingly the literature assumes that the most difficult part about being in the field is the foreignness of the researcher. So what about the problems confronted by those of us who are familiar with our research site?

I have subsequently conducted both in-depth interviews with scholars who have returned from their field research at home² and an online survey targeting international graduate students (IGSs) of Political Science in the United States.³ Of the 127 individuals who completed the survey, 51% were male and 48% were female, and their age ranged from 22 to 64 years, though the vast majority (89%) were between 25 and 35 years old. My goal was to assess how widespread "going home" actually is, and where the benefits and pitfalls of this choice lie. This article presents selected

results about the advantages and disadvantages of the "indigenous researcher."

Field research is extremely popular among IGSs: 69% of IGSs are planning to or have already conducted field research.⁴ Of these, 62% go "home" to conduct research.⁵ Despite the fact that the home country choice is quite common (and indeed, many American scholars study the United States), there seems to be a stigma attached to it. As the authors of *Overseas Research* write: "Having raised the issue of insider research, we should note it often carries less status professionally. Many grants-makers will not fund research in the country of origin [...]. Furthermore, some potential employers, especially academic departments, look down upon those who return to their native lands for research as if they somehow lacked the courage to step away from the familiar" (Barrett and Cason 1997).

Table 1. Home Regions of Survey Respondents

Home Region	Number of Respondents
Africa & Middle East	13
Canada	15
Central & South America	23
Asia & Oceania	36
Eastern Europe (incl. Russia & Turkey)	25
Western Europe	32

Advantages of Fieldwork at Home

True, travelling to a familiar place to study politics offers clear advantages. One of the most significant benefits seems to be linguistic – 94% speak the relevant language(s) fluently. The vast majority of survey respondents (96%) also say they are familiar with the home country culture, understand cultural subtleties (87%), and are aware of regional similarities and differences (83%). According to Fengshi Wu, now an assistant professor in the

Department of Government and Public Administration, Chinese University of Hong Kong, feeling comfortable with the language and understanding cultural subtleties – what's unspoken or cannot be said – made her much more confident in the interpretations of her qualitative data. Thus, indigenous researchers come into the field with a high level of understanding of cultural nuances, informal conversations, hints, idioms, jokes, and so forth. Cultural and linguistic skills are important even before the research itself begins. These scholars are well-equipped to assess whether their research design can be implemented practically and are likely to have fewer misconceptions that have to be "worked off" before they can get to the "meat" of their study. Robert Yin notes the high cost of selecting the wrong case for your theoretical goals – home researchers are more likely than not to avoid this problem (Yin 2003).

The anthropologist Robert Burgess points out that "native" researchers have an easier time gaining access to subjects by blending into social situations and establishing "natural" interactions (Burgess 1984). Surveyed IGSs report drawing extensively on pre-existing contacts (74%). Respondents also cited a variety of practical advantages. They began their research able to navigate logistics such as transportation, housing, and finances (83%), and most did not need to secure a visa (83%). As a



result of being able to stay with family and friends, borrow cars, and avoid the cost of "novice" mistakes, 72.2% thought that research in their home country was more affordable than elsewhere. In countries with security problems, familiarity with your surroundings can be vital for avoiding danger. For instance, Kemi George (University of Massachusetts), who undertook fieldwork in Jamaica, said that some areas of Kingston are quite dangerous. "But growing up there, I knew ways and times to travel there safely. I would not recommend that to someone who does not know the social mores of traveling in such areas." Interviewees also noted the tremendous value of having a personal support system of family and friends in place. While it may seem that this merely makes fieldwork more pleasant, Barrett and Cason argue that "personal misery or stress too often ruins the research experience, while a joyful experience often contributes to outstanding fieldwork, if only invisibly" (Barrett and Cason 1997).

Field work manuals warn about the experience of "culture shock" which can slow down research, as well as "reverse culture shock" which can lead to "post-fieldwork blues" (Agar 1996; Devereux and Hoddinott 1993). IGSs are usually so accustomed to moving between cultures that this is less often a concern (see Table 2). As one subject who conducted fieldwork in India put it: "When exposure to difference becomes the norm, there's no shock left."

The majority (66%) of home researchers go to other countries for comparative studies and therefore cannot be accused of being afraid to step away from the familiar. They note the benefits, however, of "training" for the other cases in their home states, arguing that they then know where their strengths and weakness-

es lie and how best to maneuver the research process. American doctoral student Megan Reif (University of Michigan), who conducted research in New Jersey, Pakistan and Algeria, notes: "Every comparativist should study his or her own country, even if the main goal is to study other countries. It makes you conscious of your responsibility as a researcher to 'get it right' and do justice to the complexities of the social situation."

Table 2. Experiences of Culture Shock

	Experience of 'culture shock' when beginning field research in home country?	Experience of 'reverse culture shock' when returning to the US after conducting field research in home country?
Strongly agree	11%	5%
Somewhat agree	19%	13%
Somewhat disagree	13%	16%
Strongly disagree	51%	50%

Disadvantages of Fieldwork at Home

Do all these advantages make fieldwork at home so easy that funding agencies and academic departments should rightly be suspicious of scholars choosing this path? I believe that, on the contrary, employers and colleagues should value the cultural and theoretical insight which indigenous researchers bring to the profession. Moreover, fieldwork at home comes with disadvantages and challenges which are rarely acknowledged. In particular, personal obligations often become burdensome: 43% of survey respondents say that family and/or friends in their home country might be a distraction from research; 45% have other obligations (such as non-academic professional or familial commitments) while in the field. In other words, social responsibilities prevent an exclusive concentration on academic work.⁶ Furthermore, being an "insider" is not always the most beneficial vantage point during research, nor do home country scholars auto-

matically meet the definition of an "insider."

Being viewed as an outsider can be a crucial advantage during research. Outsiders are expected to be naive, can ask more general questions, and are not penalized as harshly for errors. On the flip side, insiders are expected not to pursue certain lines of inquiry (Lee 2001), and quickly elicit incredulity when they violate this

expectation. Outsiders also may be able to gain access to interlocutors more easily – people may be curious

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or flattered that someone came from far away to investigate their problems. And vulnerable groups especially can be more likely to trust those who are perceived as not directly

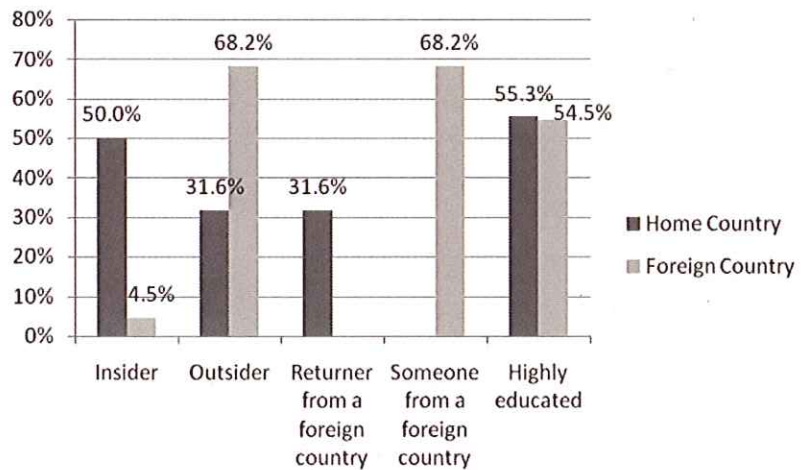


implicated in local issues and communities.

On a related point, because indigenous researchers value their relationships in a country often above and beyond their meaning for the research project, it can be difficult to obtain multiple perspectives without putting existing social relations at risk. As Ming-Yeh Lee argues, “for the indigenous researcher in a violent social conflict, opportunity, access, and security favor the study of one’s own social group. To put this another way, the advantage researchers have, in being socially placed and accredited by preexisting links to the setting, also usually restricts them to studying ‘their own kind’” (Lee 2001). Notwithstanding their advantage of using prior knowledge to keep out of trouble, field workers at home can also in some cases be more vulnerable to restrictions on civil liberties or be in more physical danger than outsiders.

A further concern is whether familiarity with a culture is helpful in “translating observations into data.” As Robert Burgess asks: “will researchers recognize patterns in a society in which they are thoroughly acculturated? Are there problems in selecting what to study? Will researchers give full coverage to situations with which they are already familiar?” (Burgess 1984). For outsiders, processing the collected data into theoretical propositions might come easier, precisely because some subtleties are missed – my interview partner Sohini Guha (McGill University) said that she was so immersed in the “thickness” of the data that she found it hard to achieve the distance necessary to see the “big picture.” Finally, insiders are frequently accused of bias due to the emotions they are thought to invest in their research (Naples 1996). An outsider role might more easily avoid over identifying with or against the

Chart 1. Perceptions of Researchers in Home and Foreign Countries



group under study (Burgess 1984). On this point, the literature concludes that scholars need to be clear about their biases and make what Edward Said called a personal “inventory” as part of the research process (Rossman and Rallis 1998; Said 1979).

Insider and Outsider Dynamics

While the injunction to be aware of biases derived from insider status is certainly important, identity is more than a potentially distorting variable – it is an ever-changing and malleable part of fieldwork. My research with “indigenous scholars” suggests that whether you are an insider or outsider is usually not a straightforward matter. Both perceptions by others and a researcher’s own feeling about his or her identity change over time, depending on location and context. Despite linguistic proficiency, cultural skills and logistical advantages, my interviewees report often not feeling like insiders, especially when regional, ethnic, and other differences come into play. As Sohini Guha, who conducted research in India, noted, she never felt like an insider. Getting to know a family in the field well, coming

to identify with them, she still knew she could leave whenever she chose. “You witness the terrible material conditions, the degradation, and you feel

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huge empathy. But the gap is too large – it impedes all the time. You’re painfully aware that it’s just six months of your life, that you’re there in the first place because you’ll be getting back and writing a thesis. And because you empathize, there’s so much guilt. The outsider status is ridden with guilt.”

In fact, educational level appears to be perceived as the most significant difference between researchers and subjects – whether at home or in a foreign country (see Chart 1).

Shahrashoub Razavi, a scholar who conducted field research in her home country of Iran, writes: “Working in one’s own society does not resolve the issue of power asymmetry. Although nationality or color may not present a problem, the fact that the researcher (by definition) has had educational opportunities not available to many others means that she or he is relatively privileged in terms of background as well (unless one chooses to work among the elite)” (Razavi 1993).

Moreover, scholarly identity can change immensely over time. As Fengshi Wu, who conducted her research in China, pointed out, particularly in a country undergoing political and economic transition, a few years abroad for graduate school can mean you are no longer intimately familiar with the politics and culture in your home. “It’s important to understand that our assumptions and memories may no longer hold, that we may need to adapt.” Lee writes, “[The researcher], although quite clearly a native, is often distanced from the setting by education and metropolitan ways sometimes acquired in another country” (Lee 2001). Numerous of my interviewees mentioned being perceived as neither insider nor outsider, but rather as a ‘third category’: a returner. Wu told me that her respondents would comment, “You don’t understand China anymore, you’re so westernized.” A subject who conducted research in the Philippines, related that due to the historical relationship between her country and the United States, returners must confront the legacies of colonialism. Survey results confirm that the identity of a “returner” is a highly relevant one: 32% report being perceived as a

returner (see Chart 1) and, when asked about their own sentiments, 39% also *felt* like a returner in their home country.

While IGSs report feeling and being perceived like insiders in their home countries to much greater extent than during their research elsewhere, a significant proportion of them cite other identities which complicate their research irrespective of the research location: class, ethnic, gender, generational, and regional diversities. Furthermore, there is no real agreement on whether an insider or outsider status is more beneficial. Much depends on context, timing and the identity of interlocutors. In anthropology, the idea that there is a distinction between conducting field work at home or in a foreign place has

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recently been questioned. Scholars critique the construction of “home” as an unchanging location and argue that social stances from which research communities are approached are never fixed (Naples 1996; Norman 2000). Whether at home or elsewhere, “during fieldwork the researcher’s power is negotiated,

not given,” Gabo Ntseane writes (Ntseane 2001).

Insider privilege, then, is something that must be earned rather than assumed. Though “indigenous” researchers can often have an easier time earning this status, their identity can also become extremely problematic. In general, fieldworkers must learn how to be aware of what they bring to the research process, how this affects their interactions in the field, and how they choose to deal with their identity. They must gauge whether they want to work toward becoming insiders or trusted out-

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siders. Most scholars play up parts of their identity to enhance access, rapport, and understanding – it is part of virtually any social scientist’s toolbox. I would speculate, however, that the patchwork identities of IGSs make them especially sensitive to insider/outsider dynamics because they confront them in everyday life. Furthermore, fieldwork in one’s own country seems to necessitate confronting the issue of objectivity. In conclusion, there are clear advantages that come with going home to conduct research – and political scientists should value the insight that

comes with doing so. However, indigenous fieldwork is by no means automatically easier than in a foreign location. All researchers may face the problems of being an insider or outsider in a complicated research context. The experience of going home to conduct research should be food for thought for anyone headed to the field.

Notes

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² Interviewees from both the United States and Canada were found through an ad in the *APSA-CP* newsletter, a request sent to the IQRM listserv, and personal referrals.

³ The survey was conducted between March 2 and April 18, 2008 through SurveyMonkey.com. Requests for IGSs to participate were sent to approximately forty US graduate programs in Political Science and the IQRM alumni listserv, and a link was posted on the APSA-CP newsletter website. Two hundred eight individuals began the lengthy online questionnaire and it was completed by 127 (a response rate of 61.1%).

⁴ The large number of field researchers among IGSs is partly explained by the fact that almost half (49.3%) of them have declared Comparative Politics their primary field.

⁵ What "home" means to someone is often quite complicated and the closeness of the relationship with that

place varies greatly from scholar to scholar. For the purposes of this article, I adopt a distinction between conducting research in a place that is "foreign" and a place with which one is more or less intimately familiar, where one has lived for a long period of time and feels culturally at home.

⁶ Of course, as one of my interviewees pointed out, social responsibilities do not arise only when one is already familiar with a place, but can be the condition for receiving the social help one needs to conduct research anywhere, as well as an ethical imperative.

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