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# The 800-Pound Gaijin in the Room: Strategies and Tactics for Conducting Fieldwork in Japan and Abroad

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# The 800-Pound *Gaijin* in the Room: Strategies and Tactics for Conducting Fieldwork in Japan and Abroad

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Two ideographs make up the Japanese word *gaijin*, the first meaning “outside” or “out of place” and the second meaning “person.” Hence *gaijin* literally means an outsider or foreigner, and in polite Japanese most speakers opt for the slightly less brusque sounding *gaikokujin*, which places the emphasis on the foreign nation (*koku*) from which the alien comes. But as political scientists doing fieldwork abroad, we are all foreigners, if not because of superficial differences such as pigmentation, accent, or dress, then because of our motivations and goals—gaining information, generating and testing hypotheses, and so forth. When we speak to informants abroad—whether in Japan, India, France, or elsewhere—to further our research, we may see ourselves as 800-pound gorillas who can bring conversations to a halt, generate unwanted propositions from nearby residents, and induce stares and pointing.

Most graduate school training for social scientists focuses on details ranging from properly defining one’s independent variable to ensuring that we have sufficient cases from which to draw broader inferences. And doctoral candidates regularly fly off to carry out fieldwork alike with two suitcases, several semesters of language training, and a recently approved prospectus. But few social scientists receive advice on what impact sex, ethnicity, and religious differences may have on interactions with our informants or how to successfully integrate fieldwork into broader research frameworks. Rarer still is advice on how to gain interviews with important decision makers or how to balance confidentiality with replicability.

As an identifiable minority—recognizable as a Jewish man because of the *kippah* (Jewish headcovering) on my head and as an American due to the color of my skin and/or my accent—I have catalogued a variety of reactions and encounters to my ethnicity and race during my fieldwork in France, Japan, and India. This article focuses on three interrelated issues that revolve around fieldwork: the varying impacts of difference, the need to go beyond “soaking and poking,” and best practices in the field.

## THEY NEED NOT BE “AWKWARD MOMENTS”:<sup>1</sup> THE VARYING IMPACT OF DIFFERENCE

It would be a critical mistake to imagine that gender, race, ethnicity, or other intersectional identity markers uniformly impact fieldwork in a negative way.<sup>2</sup> On the contrary, in many cases being a *gaijin*, like the American Express card, has its privileges. In many cases I and my fellow researchers experi-

enced the most negative reactions from other academics abroad, as opposed to informants or residents. Certainly, we have all been exposed to negative reactions in the field because of difference, including direct and indirect stares, a refusal to speak with us (despite language skills) because of foreignness, and occasionally obvious hostility.

In one case a fellow passenger on the metro in Paris began to mutter threats in French while staring angrily at the *kippah* on my head, and I quickly left the train to avoid him. While the event elevated my heart rate and made my hands shake out of panic, the incident was a rare one that was not repeated during the rest of my fieldwork there. (Following the incident I simply wore a cap while in public in France, and covering up when in hostile territory may be obvious advice to others who can do so.) In Japan, I encountered a handful of people who simply waved their hands back and forth in front of their faces when I tried to speak with them or who walked away when I approached them. They probably believed that I would want to speak with them in English, which can challenge the conversation skills of older Japanese citizens.

However, based on my own experiences and those of fellow researchers with whom I spoke, being an outsider generally did not prevent us from collecting information or actually worked in our favor. As Suzanne Culter said (2003, 226) “whether gender and age are assets or impediments depends on the situation.” Many of our experiences are quite similar to those of Dana Buntrock who described (personal communication, September 19, 2008) how as a nearly 50-year-old white female conducting fieldwork in Japan she has been “going to construction sites, drinking with contractors and the like for over 15 years, and my race and gender have been either a plus or—more often—not of much interest and concern after the first few weeks.”

Difference revolves upon novelty, so our otherness tends to fade rapidly, especially if we engage in multiple contacts over time with the same informants. Robert Moorehead described (personal communication, September 18, 2008) how, “At first, I did get a lot of comments about how I could use chopsticks, eat Japanese food, acted Japanese, etc., even though I told teachers I had lived in Japan previously . . . Gradually, these comments faded. I think some of the comments were simple conversation starters, as teachers got to know me.” In my own case, while my colleagues at the Japanese firm where I was working initially were hesitant to speak to me, as they observed that I could speak Japanese and did my best to observe Japanese norms, they opened up. Beyond short-lived

disruptions that may impede our ability to ask questions, being a gaijin can bring with it a number of benefits.

First, many of us conduct research in very specific research areas, and our informants may be excited to speak to someone who actually cares about what they do. Michael Smitka described (personal communication, September 18, 2008) how he has experienced that “not that many outsiders want to chat with small business people about what in many cases is their passion or lifework.” As few reporters or scholars regularly approach our informants to ask them questions, displaying a genuine interest in their activities can help to loosen tongues. Additional reasons may drive our informants to take the time to speak with us.

In her often risky experiences interviewing terrorists, Jessica Stern (2003, xxix) theorizes that her informants spoke to her out of loneliness, and more benignly in many of my own experiences in Japan, France, and India, local residents were quite excited that a foreign researcher was interested in the details of their lives. I spent a week living with anti-dam protestors in a farming community on the Japanese island of

fellow academics abroad than we have with our informants or neighbors abroad. Belinda Robnett (2006, 489), for example, describes how during a job interview, her fellow scholars—not the objects of her research—questioned her authenticity as a black scholar. She says that they “boycotted the rest of the interview process, choosing to avoid having meals with me or to show me around town.” Joy Hendry describes on two different occasions (1999, 144) that her fellow academics responded with the most critical reactions, with one of them telling her that “British anthropologists are far more concerned with their own egos than with a study of science” (2003, 55). Several researchers whom I surveyed described relentless negativity they encountered from more seasoned scholars who might have instead provided them with guidance and advice. I also encountered older scholars who sought to dissuade me from carrying through on my research plans.

To summarize, while negative reactions to gender, religious, or ethnic differences certainly occur while conducting fieldwork, being a foreigner can also serve as an advantage.

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Shikoku, many of whom told me explicitly that they felt thrilled to be sharing the story of their struggle with a foreigner who would be able to transmit their stories to the world. They volunteered to drive me to difficult access sites near the dam construction area, took me out to bars, and introduced me to their networks of friends and activists.

Next, by definition as outsiders, we enter into existing debates as *tabulae rasae*, blank slates. By showing that we are not taking up one side of a debate or the other, especially with sensitive issues, decision makers and activists are more likely to think that investing time in telling us their story is worth the effort. John Campbell (2003, 237) describes that being from abroad is “actually a big advantage for the foreign researcher” as we can “ask . . . questions that would be mortifying in one’s own country.” Informants may hope to persuade us that their claims are accurate and hence invest more time and effort in giving us details.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, we are more likely to get fuller explanations of phenomena under study precisely because we are not locals who have heard these discussions and explanations. Rather than assuming that we are familiar with the events under discussion, informants take time to explain to us what is going on. Merry White (2003, 28) describes her position of neophyte as useful because during her discussions with young informants she was an “an oddity of course, but an enthusiastic one was refreshingly *not* focused on their lives in school and study.”

In fact, perhaps contrary to our expectations, many of us have experienced more difficulties with our colleagues and

Going into the field with language training and an open curiosity more often than not results in insightful comments and interviews with informants. Indeed, colleagues described their most negative experiences as coming from colleagues, and not from their targets of research.

#### BEYOND SOAKING AND POKING<sup>4</sup>

Despite some distorted images of fieldwork,<sup>5</sup> it can do more than provide a way to soak up local culture. Fieldwork adds critical details and provides better traction on problems that remain slippery while investigated solely through large-N analysis. While some have tended to categorize fieldwork as a way of generating hypotheses (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994, 40), scholars recognize that fieldwork can provide critical insights into phenomena, confirm our hypotheses, and overturn existing wisdom.

Mark West, for example, in his 2005 book *Law in Everyday Japan* uses his deep local knowledge and adventurous fieldwork (with visits to sex hotels, sumo stables, karaoke bars, and debt counselors) to simultaneously generate and refine hypotheses about the role of legal institutions in regulating norms and behavior. Similarly Alex Cooley in his 2008 work *Base Politics* used months of fieldwork in Japan, Spain, Portugal, Romania, Greece, Turkey, Italy, and Korea to better understand the relationships between United States military bases abroad and their domestic hosts. These two books would not have been as successful without the details and understanding that came from extended time abroad.



Photo by Dan Gradell

Fieldwork can therefore function as part of the iterated process of model testing and model building. Evan Lieberman describes in his 2005 *American Political Science Review* article. By using our field experiences to examine and then sharpen hypotheses, we can iteratively work towards a more accurate theory.

Done with careful preparation, fieldwork can provide a richness of experiences that not only invigorates our presentation of our arguments but also alters and improves the frameworks in which we place them. Stories and experiences from the field can enliven presentations—whether job talks or conference panels—and better drive home our messages. For example, in presentations on the 30-year conflict over Narita Airport, I am able to display a startling image: a young girl dressed in a Japanese school uniform walking through a cordon of heavily armed riot police. This image was provided to me by an informant who used to live in a house near the end of a planned Narita Airport runway in the 1960s, and claimed that his daughter would go to school through the *kidōtai* (riot police) who ringed their house each morning. The black and white photograph drives home that this conflict strongly impacted the lives of local residents who often viewed the airport as disrupting their lives (Aldrich 2008).

Fieldwork can also provide unexpected findings that overturn conventional wisdom. Robert Putnam (1993) describes that in going to carry out research in Italy, he expected that education would explain the economic and governance differences across regions, and was surprised when a different specification—one that included social capital variables—worked better. Hendry (1999, 72) argues that “shocks and disasters . . . inevitably provoke a viable kind of spontaneous reaction in informants and, sometimes, a fairly crude kick start to thought processes turning over in no particularly systematic

properly, fieldwork itself can test and refine existing hypotheses and, most importantly, overturn conventional wisdom.

#### SUGGESTIONS FOR FIELDWORK BASED ON BEST PRACTICES

In this final section, I provide suggestions for the pre-departure and fieldwork periods. Before departing for the field:

- Obtain letters of introduction from relevant scholars, administrators, politicians, or friends. Powerful and important people can be of great assistance to you when you arrive in the field. I had made no progress at getting powerful Japanese legislators to meet with me until I was introduced to their staff by a high-powered professor known to them.
- Depart with a strong research plan in hand, but be prepared to be flexible. No researcher that I know stuck completely to a prospectus or plan, but successful scholars took the time to think through the issue as carefully as possible off site.
- Go into the field with a list of relevant questions in hand that can be accessed during conversations without distracting your informant (Campbell 2003, 236).
- Head to your university bookstore to purchase thank you gifts. As Andrew Gordon (2003, 269) suggests, “Never come to an interview empty handed. Your gift, or *omiyage*, need not be grand.” In my own case, before departing for the field I stopped by the bookstore to pick up handfuls of Harvard lapel pins. While inexpensive, they displayed my home institution and also worked as a way to break the ice with informants.
- Ensure that your wardrobe is appropriate for the individuals you will be meeting or the events you will in which

direction in the ethnographer.” A graduate student in the economics department of the University of Chicago, Sudhir Venkatesh (*Gang Leader for a Day*, 2008), used extended fieldwork among gangs in urban Chicago to overturn stereotypes about drug dealing; without his time in the field he would never have uncovered the empirical reality that “bottom level” dealers make less than they would at fast food restaurant jobs. These sorts of shocks come strongest when we see them in person and they can dispense with conventional wisdom in the blink of an eye.

Fieldwork therefore serves as more than a way of gaining new ideas for testing through analysis of quantitative datasets and as more than a way of merely soaking up local culture. Done





Photo by Dan Gradell

you will be participating. Hsueh (2008, 19) describes this as “dressing the part” as she “always dressed in attire appropriate to the research/interview setting. To an interview with a telecoms executive, I dressed in a suit ... When I visited factories, I dressed in clothes that allow me to blend in with other factory managers.”

- Ensure that you have business cards, preferably both in your native language and in the local language. These are standard for interactions in East Asia, for example, and they are helpful not only because they provide a useful ice breaker at the start of a meeting but also because they enable informants to stay in touch with you after your interview.
- Take the time to set up an affiliation with a local research institute in your fieldwork country before you arrive. An affiliation, especially with a well-known university, provides legitimacy along with an address for package and mail delivery and a home base for checking in with other scholars.

#### When in the field:

- Try to maintain as balanced a perspective as possible; avoid “going native” like Kurtz in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and steer clear of “intervention”<sup>6</sup> or “advocacy research” perspectives. As Janice Irvine (2006, 494) pointed out for social scientists, “it is still difficult to call a lie a lie” and we need to do our best to maintain whatever objectivity we can. Informants in Japan and France regularly asked me what my position was on issues of nuclear power and I did my best to fend off such questions by professing a lack of sufficient knowledge about the subject. While these may not have satisfied my inter-

rogators, these exchanges reminded me of the need to hold my own judgments in check into as late into the project as possible.

- Use multiple methods to gain data. Try cold calling, snowball interviewing techniques, online mailing lists, guerrilla interviewing where you “accidentally” meet someone and walk with them while speaking to them, perusing industry newsletters, and speaking to friends and neighbors who might know relevant individuals (Hertog 2006).
- Ellis Krauss’s argument (2003, 184) that “more informal and spontaneous interviews, or those held at restaurants or other natural settings, often elicited

more candid responses from reporters” may work well for men interviewing men, but for women an office or more institutional location may set a more appropriate tone.

- Use local scholars and contacts as sounding boards. As Guven Witteveen says (personal communication, September 21, 2008), “In visual terms the outsider has both a telephoto (long range) and wide-angle (big picture) lens, but misses the important middle-ground (normal lens range).” Scholars from your field site can round out your perspective and fill in details of which you are not aware. Pragmatically, they will be helpful contacts for the future.
- Practice militant note taking during interviews and while in the field. Joy Hendry (1999, 48) admits that her initial scribbles “were haphazard thoughts at the time, and I noted them all carefully in my diary. Later they became an important part of a line of thinking that I had hardly begun to develop.” I have not had success at using tape recorders during interviews, so my (often hastily jotted) notes form the basis for my longer transcriptions after the fact. I would suggest rushing after the interview to expand your notes and reflections as quickly as possible before the memory fades.
- If you hit a difficult situation, practicing rational ignorance can be of great help. As Grant Goodman (personal communication, September 23, 2008) pointed out, “It was advantageous to speak English in complex situations [such as] immigration, the police or attempting to get access to certain archives.” During my own incarceration and five-hour interrogation at the hands of Tokyo police on suspicion of being a master bicycle thief in the summer of 2001, I pleaded ignorance and did not respond to

Japanese-language questions. I survived with my ego bruised but my criminal record clean.

McConnell describes (2003, 126) anthropology as “nothing more than going to new cultures and getting headaches—but the key lies in keeping track of the headaches.” As political scientists, we have much to gain—personally and professionally—from engaging in creative and disciplined fieldwork. Rather than being overly concerned with managing or handling our differences, we should focus on preparing ourselves for the field—with letters of introduction, research plans, presents for our informants, and so on—and on reviewing the relevant literature so we can be aware of the gap between it and empirical reality. Once in the field, our experiences will deepen our understanding of our research topic and allow us to test, if not replace, conventional understanding. ■

#### NOTES

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1. This phrase borrows from the title of the 2006 symposium on fieldwork in the journal *Mobilization*.
2. It goes without saying that the most effective fieldwork can be conducted by someone, regardless of gender, ethnicity, etc. with at least partial fluency in the native language. Social scientists serious about spending time in a foreign country should ensure that their conversational skills are at least adequate for interviews or think seriously about alternative ways of gathering data.
3. As one colleague pointed out, informants may occasionally try to tell us what they think that we want to hear. But once we've recognized the narrative (for example, a trade unionist telling a labor researcher the official institute's history as opposed to the more messy reality), we can ask questions that push our informant to go beyond it.
4. Richard Fenno's 1978 work *Home Style* used the term *soaking and poking* and Robert Putnam's 1993 study of civic associations in Italy describes it as the need for a researcher to “marinate herself in the minutiae of an institution” (12).
5. Many social scientists continue to believe that fieldwork is unnecessary, time consuming, and unscientific. Fieldwork may even be seen as a non-method solely for practitioners of area studies. Such positions overlook the incredible value fieldwork has for both generating and testing hypotheses along with enlivening our studies and presentations.
6. Alain Touraine and his colleagues adopted this in their 1983 study of anti-nuclear movements in France translated into English as *Anti-nuclear Protest: The Opposition to Nuclear Energy in France*.

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