

Reflections

Combating the shocks of the 'unplayful' field. Alone! – commentary to Taylor

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This brief reflection is centered on the article, “The long shadows cast by the field: violence, trauma, and the ethnographic researcher.” The author, Stephen Taylor, should be commended for his bold move to detail his experiences with trauma and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) which were subsequent to the commencement of his doctoral fieldwork in a violent location of South Africa. The work of Taylor is stark evidence of the kaleidoscope of challenges surrounding fieldwork that the early career geographer oftentimes bear on their own, which potentially compromise their mental and physical well-being. Compounding these challenges is the cursoriness of preparedness of fledgling geographers for immersed fieldwork, and secondly, the availability of organized support systems for such individuals, once they are in the field. On these premises, I call for action amongst universities to improve the manner in which they prepare ethnographic researchers for fieldwork, particularly those to be conducted in developing countries.

Keywords: fieldwork, qualitative research, ethnography, immersion, early career geographer, field

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It is inevitable that “qualitative research that seeks to explore, understand, and explain the social world...brings researchers into contact with people” (Clark 2008, 953). I have never conducted qualitative fieldwork outside the country of my birth and upbringing – Jamaica. Yet, even within my own country I have had encounters in the field which compromised my sense of safety (McFarlane-Morris 2019). My earliest days of fieldwork were in high school and college, but much of these activities were group-based. Advancing to graduate studies in Geography, gave me the experience of solo fieldwork, which proved to be very different from what I was previously accustomed to. I can clearly recall my days of collecting data for my Master’s thesis on cultural tourism in the inner city community of Trench Town, home of the ‘king of reggae music’, Bob Marley, located in Kingston. During this time, there were spates of gun violence, which of course threatened my safety as a lone female researcher. Although there were no personal encounters with violence on the days I spent there, this was by far

the field in which I have felt the most vulnerable. Thankfully, it remained a feeling as the residents were quite welcoming and co-operative during my data collection. Reading Taylor's (2019) bold account of the anxieties and traumas he experienced while conducting doctoral fieldwork in South Africa, brought back memories of my time in this inner-city community.

Taylor's (2019) description of his experiences illustrates that 'immersive' fieldwork can bring more bitter than sweet to a young researcher. As I will expound on later in this discussion, geography departments and universities in the developed world should consider taking more meaningful roles in the preparation of graduate students before the commencement of fieldwork. Indeed, the young ethnographic researcher can be "emotionally disturbed by ... unexpected awkward situations" that unfold during data collection (Li 2008, 106). Yet, many researchers typically remain silent about such disturbances and traumas. Taylor's bravery in breaking this general hush, especially from the perspective of a male, is particularly relevant and timely, as it has been predominantly females who open up about their fieldwork challenges. One such female is Ross (2015, 183), a Caucasian Canadian female who did ethnographic fieldwork in the Caribbean. She explains that "ultimately, the combination of harassment and perpetrated assaults forced me to develop a number of defensive strategies that stood in seeming contrast to feminist concerns with reducing distance and power in the course of effective qualitative research."

It is clear from the qualitative research literature that the experiences of both male and female graduates vary but there are also common threads connecting many of the reports, particularly concerns of safety and distress. There are a few considerations that can be used to combat the shocks of fieldwork. The first point to note is that researchers from developed countries should recognize that the social, political and economic landscapes of the developing world have glaring contrast to those of the developed world. The developing world is often represented as places of violence, impoverishment, oppression and in some cases, resentment against Caucasians which could potentially have adverse consequences for acceptance of and interaction with researchers. This matter is summed up in the words of Koen, Wassenaar and Mamotte (2017, 5), who studied clinical trials in Africa, that

in South Africa in particular, for a long time, black people have felt very exploited as the subjects of research. So, very often, when the subject, the community, is a black one, the community itself will say: 'Why aren't you studying whites? Why is it now that these bloody researchers are continually studying us, black people?'

Therefore, it should not be surprising if some natives in this and similar contexts display negative attitudes towards research and researchers of other races. In the case of Taylor (2019, 189), he "considered [his] (white) body to now be a source of vulnerability, or a marker that [he] was unwelcome" in these predominantly Black neighborhoods. Although this was not a primary focus of his article, it would have been interesting for him to shed some light about how his traumatic encounters impacted the data collection process itself and the bearing it had on the research, by extension.

Secondly, and relating to my first point, is that graduate researchers are generally unprepared to face fieldwork, particularly in the developing world. This paucity in preparedness largely stems from the cursory approach of many universities and departments in preparing graduate students for fieldwork. There might be instances of fieldwork workshops as well as field risk assessments, but these generally fall short in increasing the graduate researcher's readiness for the field, particularly along the lines of responding to dangerous or mentally deteriorating situations. As Taylor (2019, 187) indicates in reference to his risk assessment, "the form did not encourage reflection on risks likely to impact mental health or well-being, and these were not raised as concerns by the scrutiny panel." He further maintains that "following news of the risk assessment approval, a member of the faculty recommended via email that I should 'drop everything, get onto the first plane you can, and move into the townships; going immediately is the only way to finish the PhD and a couple of publications in three years.'"

It is pertinent that, at the end of the day, the young researcher takes full responsibility for every decision he or she makes in the field, as rightly mentioned by Taylor (2019). However, greater responsibility can be taken by academic institutions to prepare their students for qualitative fieldwork. A significant degree of care and time is inputted into ensuring that no harm is done to human subjects

by Boards of Ethics within universities. But what are the ways in which these academic institutions can militate against possibilities of harm being done to their ethnographic researchers in the field? I am therefore proposing that more experienced geographers within and even outside of the various geography departments be recruited to share their field experiences at field workshops. These narratives should enrich the information being disbursed with the hope of increasing the preparedness of students. Additionally, considerable amount of time should be spent in carefully assessing the risk of the fieldwork and at the same time offer some recommendations to the students. Another possibility is that students could be encouraged to invest some time to read up publications of early career geographers' experiences in the field in the developing world, such as Mandiyanike (2009), Ross (2015) and Zhao (2017). These readings should help to prepare the young geographer at least mentally for some of the realities of conducting fieldwork in the developing world.

Next, I am proposing that universities and geography departments implement and/or strengthen the support network for their students going overseas to conduct fieldwork. Students who are conducting research in their native land, are more likely to be able to access the support of their families and friends who live there. But those who are new to the country or region, are often left on their own, with the exception of minor support from nearby universities or in some cases, Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs). I am suggesting that universities consider implementing a help-line through their Office of Graduate Studies or Research, in collaboration with universities' counsellors which fieldworkers should be able to call or email in case they are overwhelmed or faced with uncertainties. Thesis supervisors play significant roles in assisting graduate students in the field, but they cannot provide the relevant support single-handedly. Moreover, in many cases, and as revealed by Taylor (2019, 192), graduate students typically do not divulge 'personal' field experiences freely to their supervisors as "emotional and psychological issues are still considered to be a purely personal matter, with their place in the professionalized space of research remaining unwelcome." But since "the best long-term treatment is talking" (Taylor 2019, 193), I suggest that the talking starts sooner than later through the encouragement of the use of professional counselling services and mental assessments post-fieldwork. Waiting until it is later could mean that the emotional issues become entrenched and may lead to more serious behavioural and mental challenges.

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