

A  
Practical  
Guide

# Overseas Research

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# Contents

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List of Field Narratives	ix
Foreword	xi
Preface and Acknowledgments	xv
<b>1</b> Introduction	1
<b>2</b> Identifying a Site and Funding Source	6
Site Selection	6
Exploratory Research Trips	12
Language Training	18
Finding Funding	20
Summary	26
<b>3</b> Predeparture Preparations	27
Money and Travel	27
Health	29
Housing	33
Packing: What to Bring, What to Leave?	34
Family Matters	38
Academic Preparations	42
<b>4</b> Setting Up to Live and Work	49
Becoming Familiar with an Unfamiliar Environment	49

## 6

## The Challenges of the Field

Many texts on research methods treat technical issues and, as a consequence, are not always useful to a researcher in the field when unpredictable situations crop up, as they often do. You undoubtedly will find yourself confronted with circumstances for which orthodox methods learned from texts and graduate courses are ill suited. First-rate scholarship advances, but the keys to success are likely to be the creativity, perseverance, and training of the researcher.

Not all improvisation is well advised or effective, however. In this chapter, we discuss some issues common to many research projects but not usually addressed in methods texts. We do not provide cookbook solutions—many of the experiences we relate are idiosyncratic. We seek only to stimulate thought about how creative solutions can be found to unexpected obstacles. In particular, we address some of the not-so-obvious issues involved in choosing informants, cross-checking data, facing sensitive research topics, and, finally, finding ways to maintain credibility in the field. Throughout this discussion we consider more informal aspects of research methods, since most researchers reported that “textbook” methods were not always helpful given the unpredictable nature of fieldwork.

### Choosing and Cultivating Informants

When you go into the field, one of the first things you have to figure out is who to talk to or who to survey. Since you learn through the

people with whom you come into contact, care must be taken in choosing and cultivating informants. That said, there is no single recipe for such selection and no generalizable advice about the best ways to make informants feel comfortable with the researcher. Fieldworkers we surveyed used an extremely wide array of methods to come up with interesting and useful information about their research topics. For example, when doing research focused on political and economic elites, you can usually figure out the important people to interview by reading old newspapers and by going to research institutes to find people who may be familiar with your topic of interest. In contrast, if you are working in a rural area, you will need to quickly locate yourself within informal social networks to discover who are the most appropriate informants.

Experienced researchers uniformly emphasize the need to establish solid informal relationships with informants. In some cases this will be much more important than in others. Generally speaking, the anthropologist will need to establish longer term personal relationships than might a political scientist. Without informal, nonprofessional contact with informants, the research process is often quite frustrating.

One anthropologist illustrates the importance of informal contact in describing her method of choosing informants and her treatment of these informants after they had been selected (see below).

This account emphasizes the importance of considering what will encourage informants to cooperate. The issue of remunerating respondents has been long contested in the research methods literature, and we do not include the above example as an endorsement of respondent compensation. Instead, the point is this: Although you might be able to identify the best possible informants through diligent research, unless you earn their trust and motivate their participation, you probably will not get very far and your understanding of local circumstances will be limited.

You should be careful not to give the appearance of “using” informants. This is a tricky business when you think realistically about the research process; after all, most researchers are, in fact, using informants. You will not get the information sought without their cooperation. We simply point out that you should make sure that the process is not a one-way street. We will have more to say about the ways in which you can give something back to informants in subsequent chapters.

That said, keep in mind that some informants will not care whether they receive anything back. Public figures, such as government officials, political figures, prominent business people, sometimes even academic "stars," often do not expect or want anything from the researcher. As a consequence, some scholars caution against having high expectations of VIPs. As one political scientist put it, "I discovered quickly that I wasn't going to get much more than the official public statement out of even the ones I had imagined would be relaxed and 'honest.'" Most field researchers have to do quite a bit of digging to find informants who will give useful information and who will not worry about compromising their image.

If you use more formal sampling techniques, you have a different set of worries. Although often concerned with speaking to or surveying individuals, you may not care who these individuals are. Never-

#### Personal Relationships and the Research Process

One of the objectives of my study was to find out basic household economic information to develop a picture of how returned refugees achieved or failed to achieve self-sufficiency, and to figure out how self-sufficiency was defined. I instinctively felt in the first year of research that I didn't know the people well enough to ask them to participate in an economic survey of this nature. Tigrayans are very secretive about their income, and go to great lengths to hide their wealth from each other (even from other family members) and especially from the local government. I needed to convince people that I didn't work for the government, or the United Nations, and that if I promised to protect their confidentiality, I could be trusted.

To gain the confidence of my respondents, I wrote a one-page letter of consent that I translated into Tigrinya. I read it out loud to each potential respondent household and had the head sign or put his or her thumbprint on it. This letter assured respondents that none of the information they gave me would be used in such a way that they could be identified by it. It said that I would not tell the local government or other community members what kind of information they were providing me with. If they decided at any

theless, do not assume that random sampling techniques make the research process any easier. As Steve Boucher points out (pp. 94–95), the struggle to define the sampling frame from which to draw respondents at random can be a serious problem in itself.

If any single lesson can be drawn from this and other experiences, it is that the researcher must be creative and persistent in discovering appropriate informants. Many leads will go nowhere, and adjustments will be necessary during the research process.

We also call attention to Boucher's precise definition of the unit of analysis in his work in Mozambique. Many empirical social scientists fail to define precisely their unit(s) of analysis at an early stage and so cast about in an uncoordinated grab at data that ultimately prove difficult, if not impossible, to integrate. This problem often results from the disjuncture common between units of analysis in the

time that they did not want to participate, or if they decided at some point that they had given information that they wanted to retract, they were free to do so. The letter also stated that they would not derive any direct benefit from participating in the study while it was being conducted. The survey was quite a commitment of time, however, requiring half-hour interviews every day for four months, so I included the promise that at the end of the study I would give them their choice of a goat or a sheep as payment. My primary goal in presenting this letter was to cover myself by ensuring that I had the proper consent required by the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects at the University of Wisconsin, but it was also meant to make them feel that even though they had signed a letter, they had not forfeited their control over participation in the study. No one took advantage of the opportunity to withdraw from the study, but I think that knowing that that option was there and that their confidentiality was guaranteed encouraged respondents to be more honest than they might otherwise have been. When I eventually gave the payment, most respondents said that they had participated out of friendship to me, and that reward was unnecessary, though appreciated.

LAURA HAMMOND

### Finding the Appropriate Sampling Frame

In three of my fieldwork experiences I drew formal, random samples. This is a critical stage of research and a stage for which there is usually no formal training. One suggestion, perhaps obvious but nonetheless important, is to define very clearly the unit of analysis. For example, in Mozambique we were interested in analyzing how price liberalization was affecting the dynamism of land markets and the access of low-wealth households to agricultural land. Our principle unit of analysis was the agricultural plot. We needed to find as comprehensive a list as possible of all individual plots in our specific regions. This was perhaps the most time-consuming component of the entire research project. We first needed a random sample of all titled plots. While this was to have been relatively straightforward, in practice, it was quite a mess. When I was initially informed that any formal urban or agricultural land must be listed in the Office of Land Registry, I immediately headed there. There I was told that almost all "titled" plots were operating without formal title since the process of officializing the title was so time-consuming and expensive that virtually nobody took this last formal step. At that point I thought that the project was finished since our theory regarding the impact of title on land prices had no application in Maputo. Upon further conversation with farmers, however, I became confused because many of those with loans told me that they had used their "formal" land title as collateral. From there I headed to one of the bank branches to find out what is regarded as sufficiently "formal" collateral. One bank manager informed me that a document registered in Maputo's municipality was sufficient. Since the plots we were analyzing were in peri-urban zones, the land titling agency was a branch of the offices of the municipality.

After tracking down the functionary responsible for the filing of

peri-urban titles, I learned that his office was the last stop in the titling process before the Office of Land Registry. He showed me a very detailed map of all the parcels in the areas we were working in and suggested it would be no problem to randomly choose two hundred of the five hundred titled parcels, since each parcel was represented by an index card, which were stacked in a corner of his desk.

At this point I was very excited since it seemed that sample selection would be quite easy, but the excitement lasted only until he said, "There's only one little problem." The problem was that in 1991 one of the regions we were working in had been officially transferred to another municipality's jurisdiction. I asked why this was a problem, since the index cards for that area should be in the other municipality's office. The problem, he said, was that when the relocation occurred, a truck came to his office into which some men loaded all documentation related to the areas to be reassigned. "Why is this a problem?" I asked. Apparently, somewhere between the two municipal offices, the truck got lost and never showed up. Having come this far, I was not about to give up. So I tracked down the official in charge of municipal vehicles to see if he had any suggestions. Unfortunately, that job had been contracted to the military. After several more days I located a military official who had been involved in the incident. After spending some time convincing the official that I really wasn't interested in stealing state secrets, but only in finding lost land titles, he escorted me to several warehouses where low priority documents were stored and said that maybe he remembered something about some municipal documents being dumped here. After sifting through ceiling-high piles of documents, I found the missing index cards and was able to draw the sample.

STEVE BOUCHER

theory that informs one's work (e.g., association, firm, household, party, state) and the individual unit of inquiry operationalized in most primary data collection. You need to be attentive to, and sometimes creative about, units of analysis in fieldwork.

### Cross-Checking Data

No matter the method used, you will almost always face a dilemma: How do you know that the information being accumulated is accurate? How do you know that informants are honest? Such questions do not necessarily arise from a suspicion that informants lack integrity. You can imagine, in fact, a wide variety of reasons why informants might fudge their answers or misunderstand the question(s) asked. While deception may at times be motivated by a self-interested concern for wealth or reputation, informants might equally fear the political, social, or economic consequences of their words, or they might be telling you what they think you want to hear.

There are various ways to handle these problems. You might enlarge your sample, although this will not help much if the research techniques themselves are flawed. A common and effective way is, as one researcher put it, "the time-honored technique of triangulation—in other words, using a number of different methods and sources to obtain the same information—thereby verifying the veracity—or not—of the information." This same researcher noted that an effective way of finding out if you have got the facts right is to share findings with "particularly knowledgeable individuals (e.g., key informants)." An important way to be reasonably sure of getting the right information is through overlapping methods. A mix of qualitative and quantitative methods often provides an effective way to ensure that conclusions bear a fair relationship to reality. Sitting in on the interviews conducted by assistants helps to validate the information assistants reported.

If you have enough time in the field, it may be possible to cross-check data using different methods and repeating your work with a new twist. One scholar discovered the importance of being able to make adjustments in the middle of the research experience, which almost always makes for a more valuable end product:

I ran a two-round survey, and after the first round of the survey it was clear that the initial case studies had not covered all the territory they should have, so we carried out several more in be-

tween rounds of the survey. At this point, the case studies were less exploratory and more focused on particular topics. After the second round of the survey, we conducted a number of focus group discussions—both with survey respondents and with groups in areas where we had not done any survey work. These turned out to be invaluable, not so much in the sense of providing new data, but in correcting some misinterpretations of case study and survey data, and in offering answers to questions that arose out of survey data.

### Broaching Sensitive Subjects

In the course of fieldwork, many researchers find—if they were not already aware—that the information that they are collecting is very sensitive. The information might be sensitive because it concerns subjects people feel uncomfortable talking about (e.g., religious rites, sexuality) or because disclosure could harm the informant (e.g., disclosure of illegal activities or taxable wealth). Thinking through the ethics and the research practices associated with protecting your informants is mandatory if you are dealing with politically or socially sensitive issues. We strongly advise you to establish your own guidelines before going to the field.

You may confront unexpected sensitivity dilemmas. Keep in mind that what an outsider might consider innocuous or mundane may prove extremely sensitive in a particular research context. Aside from possibly causing harm by action or inaction (more on this below), the unexpected sensitivity of certain issues can lead to inaccurate data. One scholar pointed out how this problem of unexpected sensitivity made data collection difficult:

It was fascinating for me to see how subjects that seemed so neutral to the outsider are in fact quite sensitive to certain informants. . . . For example, in asking about food expenditures and intakes, we found two sorts of biases: on the one hand, if informants thought that we were somehow there to "judge" their eating habits, they would tend to exaggerate the data to make it seem as if they were consuming all the things that are supposed to be good for you [meat, vegetables, eggs]. On the other hand, if they thought we were there for a handout, they would underreport.

It is important to clarify your data collection objectives and the ultimate disposition of the data with all respondents before surveying begins. Holding community meetings and hiring enumerators knowledgeable about local conditions and practices can help to accomplish this.

The accuracy of the data can also be affected by who is asking the questions of informants, or even just who is present at an interview. Not only is the outside researcher's race, nationality, gender, and class likely to generate certain assumptions on the part of informants, but local enumerators can affect informants' responses to questions. For example, one of the coauthors found he could not use African enumerators to interview Asian merchants—indeed, the Africans could not even be present during interviews with these respondents—because racial tensions induced blatant misreporting of observable data. Conversely, the researcher had to stay away from some interviews with respondents in areas with particularly painful memories of colonial violence because his race adversely influenced respondents' forthrightness. These unanticipated circumstances necessitated some creative juggling of surveying schedules and teams.

Beyond the dynamics of researcher/respondent interaction, sometimes the political context can dramatically affect the process of interview and data collection. As a consequence, you must be careful to protect your safety as well as that of your informants. One contributor cautioned that "political situations can evolve very rapidly; what seems fine one year might be very dangerous just a few years later." Particularly in authoritarian regimes, people can and do get killed because of the information they possess, and since the entire research process involves obtaining information, letting the wrong people know when you obtained information can be fatal. We emphasize that this is important not only in published research results but during the research process itself, when you may well have conversations with individuals who can harm your informants. Michael Sullivan, who did his work in China, explains how creativity can be employed in sensitive situations (see opposite).

The Chinese case is atypical in the lengths to which you must go to protect informants and yourself. More often than not, you can manipulate the research topic to make it sound less threatening. One scholar who worked in Central America at the end of the Reagan/Bush period noted that "everything was sensitive. It was obvious that

### Creatively Broaching Sensitive Subjects

My research confronted the problem of broaching sensitive subject matters. I gained the confidence of interviewees through connections with colleagues and friends of theirs. . . . Most interviewees were relatively open to my inquiries, except when it came to politically sensitive subjects. I found that interviewees tended to share their personal thoughts when they were alone with me. Even so, individuals associated with government and party organizations tended to be less forthcoming in their information even if we met privately and in a safe location.

When I met with one interviewee, I found out that he was under semi-house arrest *after* I entered his home. Since he clearly informed me that his house was bugged, we talked about politically sensitive topics with references to Western political philosophy and imperial Chinese history. The Ming emperor became a hidden way to talk about paramount leader Deng Xiaoping. We had dinner together at a local restaurant. Four security personnel followed us and sat at a table next to us. Rather than talking about democracy in China, he discussed Hegel as a way to criticize Marxism-Leninism and the Chinese Communist Party.

MICHAEL SULLIVAN

people wouldn't talk to me if they thought I was interested in political issues. I tried to convey the attitude that I was interested in economic policy from a technocratic perspective and that I wanted to talk to them about it technocrat to technocrat. This really worked." Obviously, you must be careful that such manipulation does not misrepresent your work, as it might lead to enormous personal and professional complications during or after the fieldwork. Nonetheless, you can usually do some "honest" manipulation of your topic to avoid unnecessary suspicion and noncooperation from informants.

On occasion, you will have to change research topics as a consequence of the sensitivity of the issues being investigated. One scholar

recounted, "Early on in my time in Malaysia, I received advice from many sources that it would be difficult and risky to do research on indigenous peoples' movements in East Malaysia. I was advised that I would have to carefully camouflage my real interests" to receive research clearance, and that even if such clearance were obtained, the actual research process would be exceedingly difficult. "All of this convinced me that my original plans would not be feasible without extensive and risky subterfuge on my part." In the end, changing topics to something safer may be the best choice, and most seasoned researchers would agree that it is wise to maintain a flexible research agenda.

### Working with Tape Recorders

If your research methodology requires interviewing informants—and the subject matter involves sensitive issues—you will inevitably confront a crucial question: to tape record or not to tape record interviews? There is no consensus among experienced researchers beyond the simple rule that one should never tape without the permission of the interviewee. Because of this fundamental disagreement, we simply present the pros and cons of taping and some of the important issues to consider.

Those who favor taping interviews point out that taping offers an accurate record of the interview itself, and it relieves the researcher of the burden of taking notes during the interview. The latter is a particular advantage if note-taking leads you to lose the train of the conversation or eye contact with the interviewee. Especially when interviewing in a foreign language, taping can be very valuable. Having to interrupt the flow of the interview to ask for clarification about a word or phrase can seriously impede the interview. If there is a taped record of the interview, you can figure out what was said after the interview is over. Moreover, you might realize some of the subtleties of what was said when listening to the interview a second or third time. Keep in mind, however, that taping usually requires transcription (and perhaps translation) of tapes while in the field, since, as one contributor noted, "if you let a large number of interviews pile up on tape, the temptation will be too great to simply skip the tedium of getting the data into a usable form."

The case against taping can be made simply: It may introduce substantial bias in the interview process. Respondents will be less likely

to answer questions honestly if they know there is a permanent record of what they are saying, and thus may tend to be evasive, speak only in generalities, and avoid providing much useful information. The reliability of this assertion depends on the topic under discussion, the demeanor and formal position of the interviewee, and the level of trust. Hopefully, you will be able to sense whether taping will inhibit the informant's responses when asking for permission to record the interview or doing the interview itself. If during the taping you sense reticence on the part of the informant, simply ask, "Would you prefer that I turn off the tape recorder?" This might elicit important information and will signal to the interviewee your sensitivity.

If you do not tape the interview, however, you will run into the problem of how to have an accurate record of it. Some prefer taking notes during the interview, which can lead to the problems mentioned above. Others prefer to put off taking notes until after the interview is over. A colleague noted that she "did only very discrete note-taking and then immediately ran to the bathroom to jot down the rest." Others prefer to have a tape recorder with them even when they do not tape the interview, because they can quickly recount the dialogue into a tape recorder immediately after the interview. Either of these techniques requires substantial short-term memory, a trait with which not all of us are blessed.

Finally, we call attention to an important, often overlooked semantic distinction, which can have enormous consequences. Many researchers conflate "confidentiality" with "anonymity" when discussing their approach to sensitive issues. Telling an informant that something is confidential means that the *researcher will not use it* in reporting research results; the information is purely for the researcher's private edification. By contrast, the promise of anonymity simply implies that *the source will not be identified*, but that the information can be used. You must exercise care when using anonymous sources, even where the provider of information has given permission to use his or her words, if not the individual's name. "Insiders" will often be able to identify the source, which could endanger that individual. On a related note, one researcher said that "even in one's acknowledgments, one must be careful not to implicate people simply through their association with a foreign researcher." Once again, think through these ethical issues before going to the field. Most major research universities have human subjects research committees, which can provide you with established protocols regarding anonymity and confidentiality.



## Handling Unexpected Challenges to the Researcher's Credibility

We—Treasure, Futhi, and I—set out for the peri-urban community where three of the young women we'd screened at the mother-child clinic lived. The three of them fit our parameters in terms of age, size, and age of child, and had said they were interested. The first was a success. In looking for the second woman, we ran into a woman who told us that the woman we sought was not there. Our interaction was complicated and oddly hostile. I wanted to locate the correct woman or leave a message for her. Treasure wanted to explain the study to this woman, and Futhi was in a perplexingly aggressive and flippant mood. After a few minutes we left.

We crested the road leading out of this valley and stopped in the local shop for Cokes before returning to our car. Strolling along sipping our drinks, we encountered a taxi driver and a widow from the houses of the community. They told us that we had caused quite a stir. Folks were saying that we were baby-thieves like those described in the papers.

The driver seemed to think the situation was partially funny. The widow was extremely serious. I wanted to return immediately to the community and straighten the mess out but Treasure counseled waiting and Futhi joked with the taxi driver in a way that could certainly have inflamed the situation. We then allowed the two strangers to inspect our car while we appeared to be otherwise occupied. They seemed satisfied that we had no babies on us but stalked around like angry lions and took down the license number. I knew that this was not just going to blow over.

I dropped Treasure off at home and found Zenele in her cool office building and asked her advice. She said to talk to Daniel; he was at home. I buzzed USIS, where they helped me make an appointment to be interviewed on the Women's Page of the *Times* of Swaziland to get my name and face and nonthreatening activities out there before [more trouble started]. I got John Hanson at the U.S. Embassy to write a letter on fancy letterhead that stated very clearly that I was cool.

At home Daniel heard me out and agreed to return to the community with me to clear things up. We took my car and drove straight to the area and parked in the same place. Daniel ran into an acquaintance, the butcher. He advised us that the head man,

whom I had consulted days earlier, was not around and suggested we speak with a much-respected retired schoolteacher.

We found the teacher, and she advised us to return to the original homestead with her granddaughter. At the homestead people began to gather. Daniel, the original woman, and the teacher's husband moved off to talk together. The rest of us formed a loose circle. A nice young guy in a Bahai tee-shirt was conversationally relocated as my occasional translator and defender. But he was teased about being my husband and "had to leave" shortly thereafter. I could hear that Daniel was facing tough opposition. The young woman said she was convinced Futhi, Treasure, and I were the people from an earlier newspaper story about people out to steal children. I was confronted by a group that was occasionally raucous and obstreperous. It became clear that this was half deadly earnest and half entertainment. One woman, who was breastfeeding a one-and-a-half-year-old on demand, went from shrieking at me that I'd come to steal children, slit their throats, and use their body parts for some unspeakably evil purpose to dancing over to me and suggesting that we trade skirts.

The interaction was mainly in siSwati but sometimes the questions came to me in English. Always, the really outraged tones and graphic accusations were directed to me in alternating phrases—first siSwati, then English. The group was trying to make me be evil, to invest me with dangerousness and despicability. It was a struggle of images. I tried to assert my own sense of myself as a guileless foreign researcher. Daniel tried to assert [himself as] a . . . slightly aggrandized medical specialist. The process of negotiating my identity rose and fell in intensity but the theme of fierce and offended mothers confronting me was consistent.

Gradually the punctuations in the interaction died down. Daniel and I, together now, continued to insist that I was innocuous and only interested in women's nutrition and work. Daniel twisted my study topic around a bit and told people that I would arrange a time with the head man's wife and come teach about pregnant women's health. The remaining people agreed that that was a good way to end things and the group dispersed.

CAROLYN BEHRMAN

## Maintaining Credibility in the Field

The concept of academic research is a confusing one for many people (including loved ones, in many cases). Thus, field researchers often struggle with the process of self-definition. This will necessarily change depending on context. You will probably explain your project quite differently to a government bureaucrat than to a landless peasant. Whatever the audience, you need to maintain credibility in the eyes of those in the field site.

The beginning of the research period is often crucial in setting the appropriate tone. One practice that can help establish credibility is to make it clear to respondents and local communities that you will share research results with those who provide the raw data. A sociologist made a strong case for giving something back:

For both ethical and methodological reasons, research feedback is absolutely imperative. I don't know how many people sighed and agreed to be interviewed but told me they were sure I would just interview them and then run back to [the national university] and never be seen or heard from again. We made a commitment to present our findings to a village meeting in each one of the enumeration areas—a meeting that not only provoked a lot of good discussion and insight, but also provided a forum to talk about the topic of research in terms of what it meant in the community.

By sharing results with local communities, you create appropriate conditions for an ongoing relationship with those in the research site. You may also help generate good will toward other researchers who follow in your wake. Perhaps you will similarly benefit from the good conduct of those who preceded you.

When dealing with an issue that may be considered a development project, expect that many in the research site will assume that you are going to bring money into the local community. This can be a particularly difficult problem to confront, since locals often will not believe protestations that a (relatively) independent researcher cannot bring in money or projects. After all, they often have good reason not to believe what foreigners tell them. The best approach is to make it very clear at the beginning of the research period what you will and will not do for respondents or the community in general. Do not promise

anything that you cannot deliver. When you sense ambiguity about how people see your intentions, clarify them.

Also be prepared for the occasional unexpected challenges to your credibility. Although some measures can be taken to avoid such challenges, not everything can be foreseen. As the excerpts from Carolyn Behrman's journal make abundantly clear, wild and unexpected things happen to the foreign researcher that can threaten the entire project. The individuals mentioned in the story were either research assistants or local friends.

Recognize the limitations of your power to change the situation when incidents occur. Behrman reported that one of the local newspapers subsequently ran a story that was favorable to her, while another paper insinuated that she was indeed a baby-snatcher. She said that other researchers "expressed both amusement and discomfort with the apparent random and uncontrollable nature of the incident." The lesson of this story is rather simple: You cannot predict everything that will happen. Hopefully, you will think quickly on your feet when confronted by situations that can undermine credibility. Having local allies available and willing to intercede if necessary proves indispensable to field research efforts more frequently than is commonly acknowledged.

The research process is clearly fraught with uncontrollable situations. We hope, however, that by thinking through—especially *before* the fieldwork begins—the ethics of your conduct in the field, the potential pitfalls of research, and the typical ways in which fieldwork reality deviates from plans, your fieldwork will be both more productive and enjoyable.