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## PhD fieldwork in developing countries – the issue of time

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### Abstract

Educational field research in developing country contexts often exposes the fragility of mutual understanding and the tensions of diversity between researchers and those with whom they are researching. Postgraduate researchers face particular challenges arising from their lack of experience, and from the focused, individual nature of their enquiry. Logistical, emotional and ethical issues present themselves, even for researchers studying their cultures of origin. This paper seeks to learn some lessons from the experiences of a group of researchers doing fieldwork in developing countries for the first time, as part of their PhD.

A review of the literature around fieldwork reveals substantially conflicting guidance for field researchers. Practical tips (Robson et al, 1991; Nash, 2000) contrast with the writings of anthropologists such as Geertz (1988), Rosaldo (1993) or Schepher-Hughes (1992), suggesting unavoidable complexities in terms of ethics, the building and maintenance of relationships, and the perceptions of both the researcher and those with whom he or she is researching.

The experiences of a group of individual PhD field researchers form the central section of the paper, making use of a framework in which each sets out to explore examples of the relationships between the person of the researcher; the activities of the research, and a central but easily-overlooked feature of the field: the issue of time. These relationships are seen to impact on the nature of the main and often contentious object of academic research, data: its nature, its validity and reliability; or more broadly, on the development of a deeper understanding of individuals and institutions. Part of the power of these examples lies in the range of contexts and individuals represented. Activity theory is used as a basic framework through which to interrogate these experiences.

Finally, the arguments of literature are challenged and developed in relation to these experiences, leading to some propositions but also exploring some critical questions, to form a useful basis for further discussion. The experiences of the authors might be of interest to other researchers doing fieldwork in the developing world.

Keywords: Ph D, Fieldwork, Time, Developing Countries

### Introduction – a focus on time

This paper is based on the experiences of a group of novice researchers doing fieldwork in developing countries as part of their PhD. During regular meetings at the University of Manchester, this group of seven researchers established a stage to exchange academic, organisational and personal experiences from their experiences researching in developing countries. The following should be seen as a summary and comparison of these experiences which are hopefully of interest to other researchers doing fieldwork in the developing world.

At early group meetings we soon found out, that despite our different disciplinary or methodological backgrounds we all had things in common, for example that we all had similar goals to collect empirical data through fieldwork but faced different types of challenges being in the field. What slowly emerged in our discussions was that time seemed to be one of the underlying themes appearing in most of our discussions.

There are a number of books regarding fieldwork in developing countries such as (Srinivas et al, 2004, Nash, 2000, Laws et al. Devereux and Hoddinott 1993; Scheyvens and Storey 2003) , etc.) so a lot has been written about the role of the researcher in the field, the problems faced in the field, such as logistical problems, etc. But relatively little has been discussed about fieldwork in regard to time, as Rosaldo (1993) eloquently noted and begun to address:

‘When anthropologists speak informally about the pleasures and hardships of fieldwork, they often reflect on the liberation and bafflement of abandoning clock time for quite different tempos of life. In some versions, the so-called natives are habitually late. In others, they have a different sense of

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time. In yet others, they have no sense of time at all. Yet, for all the work on the cultural construction of time, little has been written on the tempo of everyday life in other cultures. Evidently, a paramount reality of other people's daily lives has eluded the ethnographer's grasp' (ibid p. 109).

In this paper, fieldwork time is our central focus. It is our intention to write about our own experiences in the field, from our perspective as postgraduate researchers, with time as an overarching theme: raising issues such as the many and various demands on time, the pace of events within the research, conflicting interpretations of time in the field, and unspoken assumptions about time between the participants.

The main section of the paper consists of personal accounts of the experiences of the PhD students of our group in the field. These contributions are ordered according to the stage of progress of the fieldwork of the contributing authors. We begin with researchers who are at an early stage of their research and have their extended fieldwork ahead of them or just returned from a pilot visit describe their experiences. We move onto those researchers who are in the middle of their fieldwork, followed by researchers who completed their PhD fieldwork some time ago.

The final section of the paper is an attempt to learn from the similarities in and differences between these accounts, using the framework of activity theory to highlight the way in which the goals of the researcher raise the issue of time to such critical prominence. We conclude the paper by considering some of the implications of these issues, for example of the preparation and training of field researchers.

## 1. Researchers engaged in pilot study

*The researchers in this section are anticipating a main piece of fieldwork, with the benefit of having made initial visits to the field.*

**Daniel:** As part of my preparation for sociological fieldwork (planned to last one year) I recently visited the field of my research, namely two villages in Andhra Pradesh, India for three weeks, hoping to develop the focus of my research questions, and to address questions of logistics. My main intention was to prepare the ground for my extended fieldwork so that I could be more efficient, and subject to fewer unwanted surprises. There are two major activities through which I believe I gained most during this visit: the building of networks or contacts, and getting to know the field by conducting pilot interviews. Together, these have added significantly to my confidence in approaching the extended fieldwork.

In planning for a short visit to the field, I felt the need to make the most of the time available. I contacted local research centres and universities in advance, in order to schedule meetings with some busy academics with similar research interests, and became affiliated with a local research institute for the time of the actual fieldwork. I had also made arrangements to stay with a host family in a small town nearby the villages concerned. Indian villages are segregated in the sense that until today the village quarters are separated by caste (and religious) lines, and I was worried that by staying in any given quarter, people from other quarters might be more sceptical of my intentions.

Being able to make personal contacts made it easier to adjust and settle in the new surroundings. Logistical issues such as accommodation, transport were much easier to address with the help of locals. During my short stay, many school children visited me, and told their teachers, so that I got invitations to visit three schools, a government school, a private school and a non-formal school. Furthermore, the initial contacts I got through my host family helped me to get a volunteer to support me as an interpreter in the villages.

I spent most of my time showing my face and introducing myself to as many people as possible in the villages, and trying out the process of interviewing subjects in the field. I quickly got a feel for what interview situations are like in the villages and what possible problems there could be. For example, in testing out questions regarding the satisfaction with life (which are referred to as 'subjective well-being'), I intended to interview people alone, but I soon realised that was not as easy as I thought. As my interpreter and I started speaking to a villager, at least one or two other people would join us out of curiosity. Outside small houses or huts, the whole interview would have to take place on the road in front, and I felt that the people I interviewed somewhat answered my questions differently when other people were around. Even bystanders started to answer questions. This made me rethink my strategy of how to approach potential participants of my interviews.

During those pilot interviews in the villages I had the help of three friends who acted as interpreters. There are three major things I have learned from this experience. Firstly, I learned that the interpreter needs a certain level of English in order to properly act as an interpreter during interviews. There are some people who are keen and willing but might lack the rigor needed for research interviews. Secondly, I have learned that it is essential to brief the interpreters before going into the field and work out a certain strategy or plan before entering the village. Before entering the village I always discussed the aim of the day with the interpreter (what subjects to target, the focus of the interviews) and we decided on a minimum of interviews we wanted to conduct. This allowed us to be more focused and once the minimum amount of interviews

where conducted, to be quite relaxed about the rest of the time in the village. Lastly, I have learned that it would be ideal to have an assistant with a related academic background. The interpreters who volunteered to help me during my pilot visit were from different academic backgrounds and all had a different level of English proficiency. Some of them were known in the villages, others not. I had the impression that all these factors had a significant effect on the outcome of the interviews. For example, one of the interpreters was known in the village since he was doing business with some of the farmers there. I had the impression that this gave me access to certain landowners in the village, but since the interpreter was a business partner to some of them, they did not seem to open regarding certain questions, especially the ones regarding the amount of land people owned and the income they have. Ideally, I assume, an interpreter should be not known in the village, or at least should not be influential in any kind of way. All these experiences during my pilot interviews made me believe that a research assistant with a social science background would be ideal as an interviewer. Therefore I have begun to search for a student or other qualified research assistant with a social science background. For this purpose, good contacts to researchers in local institutions can be of advantage. The problem this involves is to guarantee any research assistant a fair compensation for his or her work.

Lastly, I want to highlight the effects a successful pilot can have boosting one's self-confidence and enhancing the feeling of security regarding the actual fieldwork. Having met many people in the area I am going to do my fieldwork, having sustained many contacts has made me much more secure about the fact that I can live in the field for a whole year. The heartiness with what people have welcomed me even makes me look forward to my year in India. Having the experience with the interviews has assured me that it is possible to conduct the research I want. All in all, the pilot has helped me to be self-confident enough to face the things that lie ahead.

**Adrian:**

Time, the monster  
Dragon-Fly  
entranced in air  
in divine concentration  
controlling trills and tremelos

Fredoon Kabraji 1938

Kabraji summarises the Hindu relationship between time and the gods, but he also sees time as one of the controlling forces in modern life. Narayan (1987) refers to "living in a continuum between two cultures" (p9). I am aware of this as a researcher in Tamil Nadu. I am at the planning stage; I have visited Tamil Nadu as a teacher organising youth exchange programmes. I have had to analyse my teaching and the exchanges for narrative reports, not for academic papers. Here I am going to look at the personal factors which affect research in the field and relate these to a drama performance in an Indian village.

By personal factors in this context I mean the personal character traits which apply to the "double otherness" (Dermagon in Storrie, 2000, p.114). The two others here are the researcher and the researchee. Reference is often made to "Indian Time, European Time" (Trautmann in Hughes and Trautmann 1992). The Hindu tradition is dominant in Tamil Nadu, although there are few Moslems and Christians: the caste system permeates even their communities. Trautmann summarizes the Hindu religious philosophy of time from the ancient writings of Manu. This is based on the divinities and is expressed in both narrative and mathematical forms:

"Its tendency is to multiply cycles of world ages without limit, to make time an eternity." (p.171)

Cohn (in Hughes and Trautmann, 1992) discusses historical time and refers to "many traditions and many parts". He analyses an Indian village in which there are twenty-three castes and sub-castes and therefore, twenty-three historical time periods. This religious interpretation of time affects the researcher because it underlies the power structure of society. It can be difficult to interview dalits, not only because of the language challenge, but because they may be reluctant to speak openly in front of members of higher castes.

1884, the year of the International Meridian Conference, was important in the development of the concept of European Time. International agreements on time zones were needed for shipping and train timetables. The Industrial Revolution led to a move from agricultural time, dependent upon seasons, to a time cycle dictated by machines. Jedrej (in Bernard, 2002) refers to the "boundaries and intervals of time" which have "their origins in social and collective life".

In Tamil Nadu, industrial time seems to be followed in the cities, and agricultural time in the villages. Researchers have to allow for this. Time management and ethical factors are important. (Lindon,1990, in

Maxwell, 2005). Jedrej's (2002) point, relating to "social and collective life", certainly apply. I had to remember that my hosts still had the dictates of their professional, family and social lives. Itineraries can suddenly change as a visit to somebody's aunt or cousin becomes necessary. This could mean being late or missing the next appointment. In the heat of Madurai I recalled Berne (1964) discussing the structuring of time taking into account "material, social and individual" factors (p.15). In future I will have to firmly, but politely, focus myself and my hosts and the research task. Pre-visit planning is crucial. Collaboration (Maxwell 2005) in which all parties have ownership of the research may ease this negotiation of time. I am working with a colleague at the American College Madurai and four N.G.O.'s in Tamil Nadu who are participants in the youth exchange programme.

I suspect that personal time-management transcends cultural differences. I have found that the return of questionnaires and the punctual start of interviews does not depend on culture. Until Easter 2006 I was a full-time teacher and a part-time Ph. D. student. Now I am a pensioner and full-time Ph. D. student, but my time management has not improved. I still find it a challenge to focus. I will now be able to spend more time in Tamil Nadu. I might not be able to embed myself like Mead (1930) and Geertz (1973), but I will have more time for "thick description" of the social inter-actions of Tamil Nadu. Geertz(1973) refers to the biological clock "in oneself and in one's fellowmen" (p.389) and this certainly transcends culture in the sense that with age one slows but hopefully gains in other ways – in my case, in my ability to manage time.

An episode involving drama in an Indian village illustrates the importance of these points. On one recent pre-exchange visit, my wife and two students from Birmingham had been invited to visit the Florance Home Foundation Farm. It was Wednesday 10th August 2005 and we arrived on time at 11.30a.m. We were met by our host, Alexander, and the dancers and musicians of the Karugattam Theatre Group. It was a great day, but I felt that there was a serious clash between my roles as guest, youth exchange organiser and researcher. Having to take on multiple roles has time implications for the researcher. The following points are relevant:

1. I had no prior knowledge of the drama performance, not through lack of planning, but because our host wanted it to be a surprise.
2. It was an event- packed day, which left little time to write notes and interview people. My hosts know I like to keep on the move, a personal time factor which affects research. I agree, to some extent, with Mikkelsen (2005), that European time concepts are partially based on monetary values, whereas non-European concepts lay greater emphasis on social values. My friends in Tamil Nadu always include me in their social time.

The Hindu Katha drama (Narayan 1987) evolved over centuries from the religious drama tradition, but in this case Wilalraj Pushpa, the director, had adapted the form to express the social needs of the present day. The theme was the need for sexual hygiene, particularly to prevent the spread of Aids. The drama was so entertaining and thought-provoking that I forgot to write my "thick description" notes. However the camera came to my rescue, affording the opportunity to encapsulate a moment in time. Photography enabled me to record the events of the day in a "collective narrative" (Spence and Holland, 1991, in Prosser, 1998). I have selected five photographs from fifty-four to illustrate the dramatic points of the visit to the farm:

- A. The Karugattam Katha group greet us at the farm gate.
- B. The blind-folded female dancer shows how sharp her knife is by slicing fruit on the boy's head.
- C. The blind-folded dancer then slices the phallic symbol banana.
- D. Presentation of live chickens
- E. A dead snake - a reminder that fifty thousand Indians die each year from snake bites.

When I visit Tamil Nadu this year I will make better use of time when I am watching such dramatic activities. Turner (1957) and Muller (in Storrie, 2000) offer research models which could be adapted for social dramatic analysis.

Photograph C bluntly shows the dangers of sexually transmitted diseases. The audience was captivated as the sharp knife sliced nearer and nearer his groin. Photograph D shows the presentation of chickens to the women's group. The chickens were bought with money raised in Birmingham. The chicken-wallah had given them to Mary Ramsden, to her surprise, minutes before. We were now part of this social drama; the photograph becomes, in time, a dimension of the drama (Cronin in Prosser 1998)

The visit to the farm emphasized to me the need for planning to make full use of time. It also showed how much time the agricultural workers were prepared to give to meet us. It is a symbiotic relationship: some of their young people will take part in the youth exchange. The managers of Florance Home Foundation collaborate with me on research projects - a mutual beneficial use of time.

## 2. A researcher in the middle of his fieldwork

*The reflections in this section are written by a researcher in the field. He conveys a strong sense of immediacy and challenge as he looks back at progress so far. .*

**Peter:** My writing refers to my initial research experiences as a researcher who was also engaged in a consultant role in schools in Mumbai India, Bangkok Thailand and Lao PDR between November 2003 and July 2006. Although I was working in a dual role, the common thread running through all my work in these countries was the collection of data which would support my understanding of the development of inclusive schools. Many issues and dilemmas were encountered during this period as I began to develop in confidence as a researcher. Of course, the main lesson I have learnt is that as soon as you think you may know something, you find that it is infinitely more complex than you had realized.

This section discusses methodological challenges arising from a qualitative piece of research in Lao PDR. It has been recognised by many writers in the field (Ebbutt 1998, p. 415, Vulliamy, p.4 1990) that in order to undertake research in a culture and country different from one's own it is necessary to try and understand that culture from the perspective of the people who live there. For a qualitative researcher, working in a time limited context, immersing oneself in this culture is one of the greatest challenges we face. I will be discussing examples from research undertaken during the development of an educational assessment tool. The project has been ongoing since 2004 and involves nine pilot primary schools, local and national advisors, representatives from the Ministry of Education and coordinators from the funding NGO. My role has been as the consultant leading the project and also as a participant researcher. The developmental nature of the project has necessitated several long stays in Lao working alongside colleagues in schools, workshops and planning meetings, evaluating and re-designing the assessment materials as they are used. On a fundamental level, as a researcher, I have the opportunity to embed myself in the local setting and culture over a reasonably long period of time. I would like to focus in on several key methodological challenges that have emerged over the last twenty-four months and which have informed the way in which I have evaluated and adapted my approaches to data collection and analysis. These challenges have a common unifying feature, in that they impact upon the time element of the research – specifically how much longer it takes to carry out than has been initially planned.

How is it that we develop real understanding through our research? Working as a researcher in the field we refer to the collection of data, as if this is something separate from analysis. We gather data in the field and then we take it home and analyse it. This seems to me a misleading approach to making sense of what we do as qualitative researchers. We are collecting data, but in doing so we are developing our understanding of the context in which we are working, of the people we are working with, of our and their impact on work we are engaged in. In this sense, qualitative research can be described, in simple terms as developing our understanding of a given context. A simple definition perhaps, but a fundamental distinction is drawn between this approach and that of research as gathering and analysing data.

Qualitative research has been described as a series of circles spiraling inwards, which the researcher moves round and round as they attempt to make sense of and clarify their understanding of whatever it is they think they are studying (Ely 1991). The model suggests that the longer you work in a context the deeper your understanding becomes. You may pass the same point or feel as if you are returning to the same point in your research several times, but it is always at a different stage in your developing understanding and so your perspective is different – you interpret events or the perspectives of others in a different way. Hopefully, a deeper, more realistic understanding of the context you are working in is evolving.

My experience in Lao has echoed this model throughout my time there. Visits to Lao are always time constrained – I have a certain amount of work to get done within a two or three week period and this impacts on the ways in which I approach and plan my work. On my first visit, my task was to work with a group of advisors from each province in the country plus national advisors, to introduce the concept of school self-evaluation. As a researcher, I was aiming to reflect upon my experience of delivering the workshop, the developing understanding of participants and evaluate emerging themes and issues with key partners in the Ministry and NGO. However, at the end of the day, I estimated that I had covered perhaps 30% - 40% of the material that I had expected. Why was this?

Partly it had to do with the process of translation; but there were also other, more profound issues. The language of education may seem to be universal – children, schools, learning, development. These are key themes that underpin the language of education all over the world. Of course, life is never as simple as this. Our work was focused on 'self evaluation' and 'inclusion', which in turn are underpinned by concepts such as 'diversity' and 'school development' or 'improvement'. In trying to develop inclusive practices, which was one of the workshops key aims, it is of fundamental importance to enable the group, community or institution to develop its own language or agreed understanding of key ideas, values and concepts. In this case many of these words and ideas did not directly translate into the Lao language. For example, there is no word for inclusion in Lao. In an educational context, the nearest translation that has been used is schools 'admitting

children with mild special needs'. This differs in meaning from the definition of inclusion I was hoping to use in the project: the identification and removal of barriers and potential barriers to participation and achievement for all students (Booth and Ainscow, 2002). Clearly, a lot of discussion and exchange of understanding, perspective and experiences needed to take place in order to facilitate the participants and myself in developing a shared understanding.

An incident during the afternoon of the first day emphasised the complexity of this issue. The project was educational in context; the advisors represented eighteen provinces across the country. I asked them to get into groups of four and share with each other their experiences of visiting inclusive schools in the previous five or six months. I watched and listened as some groups began to talk to each other, but many remained silent or looked around, apparently unclear. I asked the translator what he thought was happening. At this point, the translation was being undertaken by the Ministry of Education team leader, the most senior figure in the workshop. He repeated the instructions and then, as he later explained, elaborated with some examples. After five or ten minutes he stopped talking and turned to me, saying: 'I think they'll be clearer now. Of course the problem is, not all of them actually visit schools'. Surprised, I asked him what he meant. So it was, that some six hours into the workshop, I discovered that only half the participants were actually education advisors who were engaging with schools. The other half were health based advisors who had no education background. Why had I been left unaware of this?

Reflection after the events led me to realise that there were several issues at play here. I was the western 'expert' – it would be impolite to correct me or indicate that some people did not understand what was going on. This would be seen as showing me disrespect, upsetting traditional social hierarchy (Ebbutt p.419, 1998). It could also embarrass the senior members of the workshop from the Ministry and the NGO, who should have told me the make up of the participants. It was probable that they themselves were unclear about the real nature of the work we were beginning, and did not realise the significance of the participants' backgrounds.

This episode emphasised to me the delicate balance between working collaboratively with participants and imposing my own views and values on them. If nobody was prepared to tell me for six hours that a significant number of the group did not understand what I was talking about, were they likely to share their private thoughts with me, when they understood but disagreed with me? Working in contexts of this nature, we are always at risk of self-deception - deceiving ourselves that we are working collaboratively, sharing ideas, challenging each other when we disagree, developing new ways of thinking together. In reality, unless we are very careful, we remain the 'outsider', the western expert who has the solutions and is always correct.

So, time – everything I have described has an impact on time. Obviously, everything takes much longer than you think. As a researcher we need to plan for longer periods of 'data collection' or 'understanding development'. In this case, I realised that what was really needed in order to facilitate the project's development in such a way that it belonged to the participants and to enable my own research to be truly meaningful, was my immersion in the context, in the country, the culture, the project. I needed to spend as much time, as often as I could building up relationships with the people I was working with, building trust and understanding between us. Only by doing this could we begin to cross the cultural bridges that are needed if true understanding is to *begin* to emerge. I stress the word *begin* because even after six two to three week visits, over two years, working with the project team – and we now number approximately fifty – I feel we are only *beginning* to negotiate some of the methodological challenges I have described. As researchers, we need time to move through the spirals of developing understanding.

### **3. Researchers who have completed their fieldwork**

*Looking back on fieldwork over a period of months or years, different issues and aspects of the research assume greater significance:*

**Shohel:** As a person of Bangladeshi nationality studying in the UK, I spent nine days in Bangladesh in 2003 doing background work for my fieldwork. My situation was different from that of the other researchers represented here, as I have been carrying out my fieldwork in my home country. Even so, I had concerns about access to the field and the policy of the organisations which I was hoping to work with. I was particularly worried about gate-keepers, and consequently, like Daniel, I concentrated on access and network building during my short preparational field visit. I found that things had changed over time, and access was indeed harder than it would have been when I was still living in the country. I had to come up with new ideas to develop strategies for getting access to the field, and tried to be more realistic about social culture and NGO politics. I managed to make some important contacts with some key persons from the NGO which I had chosen to work with.

Written into this story is my main dilemma as a fieldwork researcher: am I an insider or outsider? One might argue that as a Bangladeshi, I am an insider in terms of my nativity to the research subjects. But in terms of

organisation, i.e. NGO and school authority I am completely outsider. Also my own self-perception is complex; having lived as a Bangladeshi person for a long time in a foreign country, and looking at my culture from outside of the country, I have started to see things differently. I have become located in a situational space and time where identity and belonging has different dimensions. To some extent, time and distance and the way of looking at the facts have made me an outsider in my home country, so that sometimes I felt 'alien in motherland'<sup>7</sup>.

**Prudencia:** Time allows you the opportunity to see reality from a different point of view. Experiences that take place during your research in the field affect your impressions, the collection of data and even the results and conclusions. As Miguel de Unamuno said "I am myself and my circumstances". Circumstances have a big hand in how we perceive reality and how events develop during the field research. One of the most daunting but significant things in field research is when you discover that there are no clear boundaries between the professional and personal self of the researcher. Interactions take place with people as people, rather than as subjects of research. At the same time, this for me was one of the best experiences the field; when I felt I had an approximation to reality of the people I was with, in their environment.

The experience I discuss here took place in Cuba, in a School for Special Needs during a teaching visit. The school is situated in an educative complex, outskirts of a big Cuban city, where there are also other schools and educative centres. This school is a specific educative centre for children of compulsory schooling who basically have some pathology related to the sight. The school is not only an educative centre but also it is a residence for students because they come from different and distant places of the country. The state pays students all expenses during their education period, including the residence and maintenance.

Another factor in the evolution of the research work is that the concept of time depends on culture. In our experience, we found when you plan a visit, we usually estimate the time it would be needed to get our purposes, but it is also fundamental to know previously the notion of time in that culture and how people use the time in their daily lives. The people who took part in our field work have more duties than us during the time we spent there; they have their lives, families and matters to deal with, leaving little time at our disposal. Yet we expected they give us their time within the time we need to develop our project or research.

Although we all spoke Spanish, we nevertheless needed time to check our understanding of the meaning of some words or expressions, intonation, sarcastic remarks, jokes, comparisons, sayings, etc. We think as well as learning the language, researchers need to get the importance of implied messages; this is often where we find the real meaning of speech, given that in most educational contexts, formal and colloquial language coexists. The formal is used by the institution (Bernstein, 1990 and Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) but we tend to use colloquial language more frequently to express emotions, perceptions and feelings when facing a situation or problem.

Thus, researchers would need to stay long enough to correctly learn the meaning of their speeches or be helped by someone who could explain all the significances into your native language, because usually when you learn a foreign language, they teach you the formal language and polite expressions, not colloquial turn of phrases, which are more used in the daily life. In our case, it was in sharing a cup of coffee that teachers they could talk differently, giving more details, increasing the qualitative value of the data, without the pressure to answer our questions. As it is a common custom in this country, sharing a cup of coffee, you share experiences and thoughts too. But to know their customs needs time; and it is this time which gives the researcher experiences and opportunities to learn, to reflect, to reconsider the research plan or aims, and to find the right space and time to talk about impressions or beliefs.

**Ana Luisa López:** From September 2004 to August 2005 I carried out fieldwork in Chile in two schools, the Gabriela Mistral Private School in the capital city, Santiago, and the Nelquihue<sup>8</sup> School in a rural village in the IX Region, Southern Chile. Both schools have particular characteristics and backgrounds. The private school in Santiago is well known due to their experience in integrating students with special educational needs for the last decade. The school in the South is located in the poorest region of the country with a high percentage of Mapuche ("*People of the Land*") ethnic population, and it is part of a European NGO community development project since 1995. Although it is a Catholic private school, it is co-financed by the Chilean Government.

I'm a Spanish sociologist who had her first contact with Chile in 1997 when I spent three months as a volunteer in the NGO project, living and sharing with Mapuche people and those who work with them. Since then I have maintained a strong commitment with the project and with Chilean people. In 1999 I had the opportunity to go back to the country to work for UNESCO and contribute to the development of inclusive education in Latin American countries. After more than 4 years working there I felt I have learnt a lot about

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<sup>7</sup> Saying in Bangla 'Shadeshe Parabashi' which means literally 'Foreigner in homeland'.

<sup>8</sup> The names of the schools have been changed trying to guarantee confidentiality.



political normative and ministerial attempts to support inclusive education in the region, but I did not have a clue of what it was really happening within educational communities and schools.

For this reason, I decided to embark in a PhD action research project that could give me the chance to have a flavour of what it was happening within schools and to contribute to their reflection and practices attending to the diversity of the members of the community (Ainscow 1999; Howes 2001; Ainscow 2002; Booth and Ainscow 2002; Ainscow, Booth et al. 2004; Howes, Frankham et al. 2004). Then, my husband and I embarked in a long journey that took us to pack our home in Santiago, where we had been living for the last 4 years and a half, and to move to study for a year in Manchester.

After my first PhD year in England, I was determined to go back to Chile to do my fieldwork. In September 2004 we started a pilgrimage from England to Spain, living in our parent's homes, and then to Santiago de Chile, where we stayed in some friends homes until November when we were offered a place to live in the South of Chile within the NGO project, 850 km away from Santiago.

Some of my research diary notes suggest the turmoil of energy and emotions we went through until we got into our new home. It needs to be underlined that what I present is my interpretation of the interpretations I made in the field of feelings, behaviour and relationships, among other things.

*"Translation of Diary Notes: November 24<sup>th</sup> 2004.*

*Moving to the south was a complete nightmare. We put our things (all our home) on the lorry in a heavily rainy day. Everything got wet, SOAKED, and we almost caught a cold. On Saturday 13<sup>th</sup>, when we moved, we had to put some more things for the project into the lorry, down the rain at 7 o'clock in the morning. Then, a sunny day followed (which I welcomed, because our things might dry during our "road movie"). In the middle of the journey we had to stop to help other Mapuche family to move to the south. We put their things in the lorry and in the Toyota truck. They even had a motorcycle and a dog that we had to carry with us. The "road-movie" was long, we had to talk to the driver (the priest in charge of the project) to keep him awake. We arrived at 1 o'clock in the morning, again down the rain. I lost my hopes of keeping anything dry.(...) Well, I must admit that it was a really dramatic experience, and it is taking us more than a week to settle down, dry our things and get our home ready. We are still living in another house because we have everything upside down."*

It took us more than 3 months to settle down logistically, and almost over another month to be emotionally settled and felt welcome by the community (Robson, Willis et al. 1997; Nash 2000). But I would say that it was impossible for me to settle down for the whole fieldwork. Our residence permit arrangements kept us travelling back to Santiago until my fieldwork was well ahead. Besides, I have deliberately decided to carry on with the action research in the two schools, which were far apart. Thus I had to live in my friends' homes in Santiago for a week every month while I was working with the Gabriela Mistral School. This required constant adjustment of deadlines due to my personal agenda, my research agenda and the agendas of each school.

*"Translation of Diary Notes:*

*Today is April 14<sup>th</sup> 2005, and I'm in the south, it is quarter past 12. In the last days I realised that I constantly have to adapt and change the deadlines that I had arranged with the members of the Nelquihue School. This is due to many things, on one hand, the quantity of field notes that I have to handle is enormous, and I don't have enough time to register and to edit for the teachers to reflect. On the other hand, I have to adapt myself to both schools calendars. There are meetings that are suddenly cancelled, or they are postponed by some teachers. And it is also due to my own situation, mainly because of my visa arrangements. We have been all this time proceeding with our visa. We spent quite a few weeks in Santiago in January because of it, and now at last we have succeeded. But all this have delayed the time for other things."*

I had planned to start my fieldwork in October, as soon as I had arrived in Chile, but access to schools took quite a while, until January and February 2005. The delay was not only due to the logistical arrangements I was going through but also to the Chilean academic year, which finishes in December. Besides my gatekeepers' own agendas made me be dependent on their willingness or possibilities to help me.

I must also recognise that my past years in the country not only helped me to acquire the Chilean idioms and ways of speaking the Spanish language, but also an understanding, and sometimes preconception of the Chilean culture. This led me to fear that I would not be able to get access to any school, and I had to handle a quite amount of anxiety and frustration.

*"Translation of Diary Notes: January 7<sup>th</sup> 2005*

*The feeling I had was that they were not taking me seriously. Besides, knowing the Chilean culture, and their cultural difficulty to say 'no', they might be keeping me waiting, waiting, waiting, until they had say 'no' because it was too late."*

As soon as I got access I realised that the management team of both schools were willing to take part, but they wanted to do it at the right time. In the Gabriela Mistral School, they tried to make sure that the teachers welcomed the project and were willing to participate.

*"Translation of Diary Notes: January 7<sup>th</sup> 2005*

*The head teacher told me that they could not meet earlier because they had been closing the last academic year. They had to dismiss some teachers, and finish some matters. They could not find the right moment to call for a meeting until now. (...) The head teacher also said that they were interested but they were concerned about the teachers' acceptance to participate in the research. They had had a meeting yesterday with all the teachers to discuss about it."*

Finally, I managed to start my fieldwork in March 2005 with the new academic year. Given the nature of the action research process and my own personality, investing time in the schools was a crucial part of my role in order to build up rapport, trust, respectful relationships and maintain fluent communication (Bell, Caplan et al. 1993; Dyer 2000). Over the 6 months I spent in both schools, from March until August, I found out that the ritual coffee breaks and school events were community building time. Through informal conversations I had a flavour of the culture and the practices of the school. I gained a better understanding of the relationships among teachers. I also coordinated the times for data collection and the interviews and meetings for data reflection. And I even became the confidante of several teachers who felt closer to me. Permanent contact was more difficult with the Gabriela Mistral School in Santiago, but I tried to maintain frequent communication with the educational psychologist to plan my visits.

*"Translation of Diary Notes: June 14<sup>th</sup> 2005, Nelquihue School*

*This morning I have gone to Primary level at 9.45 because it was their first break. I went to talk to the 7B teacher to arrange the students' photography activity in his class. I found him playing in the playground. Then I have gone to the staff room where they were having coffee, and I have been coordinating a meeting with the Primary level reflection coordinator to be held in the afternoon. Later the 7B teacher has arrived and I will go to his class tomorrow at 9.*

*Then at 11.15, I have gone to Secondary level in their coffee break, among laughs, I have arranged the timetable of the teachers' individual reflective interviews for this week."*

Leaving the field was very emotional. The time sharing and working together bonded me with many members of each educational community: the head teacher of the Nelquihue School; the educational psychologist of the Gabriela Mistral School; the NGO community members; the members of the management teams; the teachers who shared their feelings, their certainties and uncertainties about teaching and even their personal lives; and the students, because they had an active role in the research giving their opinions. I felt that I was leaving too soon when everything was starting to take off. I promised to keep in touch and to provide them with materials for reflection in the future.

One of my main aims when I started my fieldwork was to contribute to the capacity building of the community to reflect on their practices in order to improve the way they were attending to diversity. In that short period of time, I can not confirm that through the introduction of the action research process, they became critical reflective communities sustainable in time. Nevertheless I believe that working together, we did gain a better understanding in relation to diversity and the importance of sharing our beliefs and our practices in order to respond better to the students, the colleagues and the rest of the community. I also learned to be patient, to listen, to observe and to understand the rhythm and the pace of people when involving in reflective processes that challenge our thinking, our behaviour, our practices and in conclusion, the way we see life.

**Andy:** The fieldwork for my PhD was done mainly in a period of three months in 1998, so that I am looking back over a considerably longer timespan than the other researchers represented here. As suggested in these accounts, time is enigmatic, difficult to describe and pin down: but nevertheless, it is very real in its consequences. I find it helpful to see it as a social resource (after Wallman, 1984), like information or material resources; something that is traded, shared, given and taken in the course of social life. Time was certainly central to the framework that I used in my PhD to try to understand how volunteers from the North and their Indonesian colleagues worked and learned together in Indonesian institutions such as schools, hospitals and non-governmental organizations (Howes, 2002). Volunteers' time, for example, was the subject of much discussion, and their contribution was judged in many cases by how that time was used: did they spend it all working in the school that was paying their wages? Did they work alone, or did they coordinate their time with that of others? Did they use some of their time working alongside teachers in other schools?

Sometimes the answers to these questions changed as the placement progressed; the distribution of participants' time was renegotiated, and this had the effect of changing their accounts of what was happening, who was in control, and so on. Many of the significant dynamics of development processes seemed to find an echo in these exchanges and the stories they generated (Howes, forthcoming).

Looking back now at the way my own time was distributed whilst doing this research, I see again how I positioned myself so that I kept control of my time. Over a three month period, I traveled between several islands in Nusa Tenggara Timur, to the east of Bali, visiting volunteer placements. Ferry schedules and bus journeys provided me with a skeleton schedule. It was no wonder that many of those I visited took me to be a variant of the volunteer agency's field officers, who in a similar fashion would travel around placements, finding out about progress and helping to sort out problems. Those I visited, whether volunteers or their Indonesian colleagues, generally fitted in with my schedule, allowing me to join in the activities they had planned and making time for interviews. It was convenient for me, but it raised questions about how guarded people were with me, how much they felt I could understand of their experiences, and therefore how much of the complexity they could speak about with me.

After six weeks of travelling between placements, I reversed my route to revisit some of the same placements for a more extended period. Where possible I sent ahead of me a written summary of the data generated through the first visit. On this second occasion, the volunteers and their colleagues were generally much more relaxed with me, treating me as a familiar face and sometimes as a trusted confidante, even in that short time. All in all, my fieldwork journey and the revisiting of some places struck a balance between control and responsive flexibility to circumstances. The resulting case studies were then the subject of prolonged negotiation at a distance, before they were ready to be included in the thesis. Looking back, I feel that more time in the field, being more responsive to the contexts I visited, would have almost certainly left me with a less complex rewriting task.

## Interpretations and summaries

These accounts allude to several significant issues, and it will be of help to list some of them here. A common feature of all of these accounts is the **need to achieve the research goals** that they communicate. These are not the stories of people travelling to distant places in order to learn about the people, or to experience different customs and traditions. The research focus in each case has a very significant effect, even on the construction of these accounts. Particular people assume much greater importance as gatekeepers than they normally would do; conversations and coffee breaks are important not only as social occasions but because of what is going on through that social behaviour. Above all, there is a sense in all these accounts that time is limited. Within that limited time, there are introductions to achieve; interviews and observation to be conducted, and in one case (Ana Luisa) changes in practice to facilitate and understand. These research demands have the effect of structuring time at many different scales, from the interval between questions in interviews, to the time allowed for comprehending a task in a workshop, to the time allotted to get to know a village and its people, to the time allowed for a fieldwork journey or for being involved in the change process in a school. The time needed to sort all these things out, we might conceptualise as *instrumental* research time.

Several researchers effectively highlight the need for **efficiency in fieldwork**, and the importance of good planning in order to achieve that (Daniel, Shohel, Prudencia, Andy). It is interesting to note a link between the planning considerations mentioned and the background of the researcher. For example, it is Daniel as a sociologist who mentions the need to avoid inadvertently aligning himself with a particular socio-economic group through the location of his accommodation; Shohel as someone who has lived in different cultures considers the implications for his access to the field of his status as insider / outsider; Prudencia with a linguistic background highlights the need to plan sufficient time to understand language-in-use, in order to effectively make sense of participants' idiom and dialect; whilst Andy's experience as an ex-volunteer leads him to imitate a volunteer field officer in the planning of his journey. The need for efficiency also influences the one-off or repeated nature of the fieldwork (so that for example, Shohel's research on transition led him to make several fieldwork visits, each taking place over the period in which pupils were making the transition from one school to another).

The need for **alertness to linguistic and cultural barriers** is another issue discussed in several of these accounts (Adrian, Peter and Ana Luisa). Adrian's vivid story of the dramatic village dance evokes the tacit and to the researcher unknown dimensions and boundaries of time, resonant with traditions of which he or she can hardly be aware. Peter's story of the lack of communication in the context of a workshop is a telling example of the impossibility of knowing enough at the start of fieldwork to make the right decisions, and therefore of the need to notice clues to problems as they occur, such as indications of stress and evidence of misunderstanding, and to spend time negotiating meaning. Ana Luisa writes about the extended amount of time that she devoted to building meaningful relationships with the participants of her research, and the consequences for the point she reached by the end of her allotted fieldwork period. Only the final account,

written after an interval of some eight years, makes no explicit mention of language, and the difficulties of interpreting and communicating with people in different cultural contexts. In time of course, many of our immediate and pressing problems are forgotten.

A related aspect which is communicated in most of these accounts is a **sense of uncertainty and anticipation** on the part of the researcher. Daniel's account, for instance, is that of a researcher working hard to understand himself and his role in a new and very different context – and indeed he is explicit about the increase in confidence that the pilot visit has given him. After fieldwork, uncertainties have largely been forgotten, but replaced with a strong **sense of emotional involvement and unresolved connection**. Prudencia writes with nostalgic feeling about the sense of connection that she felt in the field; Andy about the difficulties of maintaining what had been evidently meaningful relationships; Ana Luisa about the difficulty of leaving friends and colleagues with their now-familiar and ongoing difficulties.

In all the accounts then, there appears to be a tension between the *structuring* of time needed to follow through a particular research process to a satisfactory conclusion, and the necessary *flexibility* to work effectively in a context in which many of the problems and issues cannot be determined in advance. It could be argued that two amounts of time are needed – time to organise and create the conditions to do the research, and time to actually carry out the research activities. Indeed, such an assumption seems to be embedded in much of the research preparation which goes on in universities, where the focus is almost invariably on research activities (conducting and analysing interviews and observations, for example) and where very little mention is made of the necessarily unstructured, reactive learning process which is entailed in organising that research in the context of many unknowable and unforeseeable conditions.

We would argue that such a conceptual separation is largely unhelpful, and that it is more helpful to consider the research process as a whole, in which it is necessary to strike a *balance* between following a structured and systematic approach on the one hand, and responding flexibly to particular eventualities on the other. Conceptualising field research as a balancing act strikes us as a much more realistic and useful approach to preparing new researchers for this experience.

Removing this conceptual separation is more powerful still, if one considers the implications for the concept of data. Rather than data being restricted only to the products of systematic and identifiable research activities, we can see how dealing responsively with difficulties in setting up the research process, in a different cultural context, represents an equally valuable opportunity to generate research data. Time given to developing an understanding of the field in order to be able to organise the research effectively, and time given over to specifically research activities, can then be brought together into a larger concept of fieldwork time, some of which is highly structured and systematic, and some of which is flexibly organised, but which together yield the deeper understanding of the particular phenomenon being studied which is the main and original object of the research in the first place. This fits well with Ely's (1991) concept of the spiralling journey towards understanding, as mentioned earlier by Peter. It is time for our understanding which is most necessary.

<b>Field research as a balancing act</b>		
Striking a balance between following a structured and systematic approach on the one hand, and responding flexibly to particular eventualities on the other		
<i>structuring</i>	<b>A new concept of fieldwork time</b>	<i>flexibility</i>
<b>need to achieve research goals</b>  <b>efficiency in fieldwork</b>	... some of which is highly structured and systematic, and some of which is flexibly organised  ....but which together yields the deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied	<b>alertness to linguistic and cultural barriers</b>  <b>sense of uncertainty and anticipation</b>  <b>sense of emotional involvement and unresolved connection</b>

## Conclusions

Insofar as this conceptualisation of fieldwork time has any merit, it has considerable implications for the preparation of researchers for their initial period of field research. The sense of fieldwork as an emotional and often lonely journey is usually alluded to, but rarely considered as an opportunity for learning and as a data-generating experience in its own right. The balance between driving forwards an agenda on the one

hand, and learning responsively on the other, is hardly ever discussed, with all the implications that has for the conduct of interviews, content of fieldnotes, and the usefulness of conceptual frameworks.

What kind of preparation is needed to start to build the strategies and capabilities necessary to do fieldwork with a flexible and open attitude in challenging situations, in order to get understandings and contribute to academic knowledge? This question is too big for us to tackle thoroughly here. Instead, we end with a summary of some of the implications for our conceptualisation of fieldwork time for different stages in the research.

Stage of field research	Our conclusion	Some implications for research practice
Preparation	There is a need for flexibility as well as structured design	Spend more time working on strategies which build in flexibility at every level and timescale
Starting fieldwork	Data is generated not only through systematic research activity but in the process of building relationships, negotiating meaning, making mistakes...	Increase the status of the fieldwork diary, and give more consideration to its organisation and structuring
In the middle of fieldwork	A balance between structured research activity and responsive learning is vital	Consider carefully how different kinds of data can be brought together most effectively, and the implications for research questions
After fieldwork	The continued involvement of participants is essential to critiquing the researcher's understanding	Consider how to arrange opportunities for feedback and comment.

We would very much welcome comments and suggestions on or arising from this paper. Please email Andy Howes at [andrew.howes@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:andrew.howes@manchester.ac.uk) or ring 0161 2753444

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