Final Report - Fieldwork Support Group Kick-off Event

Me, my PhD and the Field: Navigating the challenges of fieldwork

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Content

I) Foreword by the organizers

During recent years, more and more awareness regarding the challenges and difficulties of fieldwork for PhD students has become public. The death of Giulio Regeni, PhD student at the University of Cambridge during his fieldwork in Egypt, but also some PhD students that were arrested or returned from their fieldwork after having experienced sexual violence (including rape) and mental health issues of all types in the field have sparked lively discussions in the PhD community (Pollard, 2009; Johansson, 2015). Some universities have begun more fieldwork training and preparation (i.e. University of Sussex, Royal Holloway London), but some still rely on student-led initiatives and only one-day events and conferences (i.e. Oxford, Cambridge, University of Bath). An entire fieldwork preparation 'industry' has now emerged to fill this gap, with costly seminars that PhD students who want to prepare for fieldwork need to cover using their own funds (i.e. the costly services offered by the New Ethnographer, or Preparation seminars offered in Glasgow for PGRs specifically which charge £345 per participant). The entire preparation before fieldwork and the support during and after cannot fully be provided by the supervisory team. Time and resources are limited, and there is a need to involve universities to step in and to provide the best possible service to ensure that PGRs can rely on adequate support.

We, PGRs at UEA who have conducted, or will be conducting fieldwork, have recognized this context and have identified a lack. We have connected PGRs across the various departments of UEA and in some initial meetings and communication through various channels have come to the conclusion that our departments, but also the infrastructure provided by the doctoral college are not addressing the issues adequately.

Hence, the idea emerged to become active. It needs to be said that this is not the first time that students have identified this need. In previous years, a series called "Embracing the Unknown" was conducted, and the SU was also approached last year by a medical student who was asking for fieldwork initiatives. However, these student-led efforts have failed to sustainably materialize due to time constraints and unsuccessful transitions after the graduation of committed PGRs.

We have formulated the following aim: to better prepare students for fieldwork, support them before, during and after their fieldwork to ensure that PGRs experience this part of their work as safely as possible (in terms of physical and psychological safety and wellbeing), and to have a generally more reflexive approach to fieldwork as part of research practices.

The first step was to create a student-led initiative that connects the various students across UEA through our fieldwork support group. To take the matter further, we had the idea to launch this project with our kick-off event.

This report summarizes the main findings from this event. We would like to thank the SU at UEA for their logistical and financial support, as well as the Courage Project which helped us significantly. Bryony Porter, Josh Melling and Martin Marko need to be thanked in particular.

We would also like to thank all our participants, and you the readers of this report. We are eager to take matters forward to make sure that the ideas of this group will become institutionalized to move from a student-led initiative to more sustainable and established structures.

Amélie Roussillon and Cindy Wilhelm

II) Purpose of the Event

When we met for the first time to discuss the outline of our Kick-Off event, we decided to take the previous "Embrace the Unknown" format as a model, but into a comprised one-day setting. We also wanted to include our experiences from participating in the fieldwork panels held at Cambridge University.

Hence, we came up with a one-day event based on the previous "Embracing the (Un)known" forum, organised around 3 thematic sessions with two speakers each.

The aim of this first event was to let PGRs know the Fieldwork Support Group exists, what we aim to do and gauge general interest. This was also an opportunity to hear what topics PGRs would like to address, what format this should take, and to have more suggestions for possible speakers and future events. This event was meant to be the starting point for future actions.

The idea was also to have an open, honest and personal discussion where the panelists share their very personal experiences on how they encountered difficulties during fieldwork and how they overcame potential obstacles. We used the Chatham House rules for our first two panels to ensure that the identity of our participants would be protected and to encourage an honest and open conversation. Every panel allowed adequate time for the audience to engage and to ask questions.

III) Event Outline

Participants: 35 participants (including speakers and organisers) registered, with representatives of DEV, AMA (SRU), EDU, NBS, ECO, PPL, ENV, HSC and BIO. Approximately 30 participants came (sometimes only for part of the day).

For Panel 3 we had invited Dr Matthew Sillence, Professor Alastair Grant, and Dr Ben Marshall to be present to get input for further university action.

Event Schedule:

10.00-10.30 - Welcome

10.30-12.00 - *Panel 1: Research Relationships and Power Dynamics*
　　　　　　(Dr Hannah Höchner, DEV & Dr Giulia Nazzaro, AMA)

12.00-13.00 - Lunch Break

13.00-14.30 - *Panel 2: Mental health & well-being before, during and after fieldwork*
　　　　　　(Cindy Wilhelm, DEV & Touseef Mir, DEV & Jock Downie UEA Wellbeing team)

14.30-15.00 - Coffee Break

15.00-16.30 - *Panel 3: Fieldwork Now and then, How can universities better face the realities of the field?*
　　　　　　(Dr Chris Wingfield, SRU & Dr Ben Jones, DEV)

16.30-17.00 - Wrap-up

IV) Summary of the Panel Discussions

Panel 1: Research relationships & power dynamics

Issues encountered/points raised	What can be done about it
Difficulty to define the notion of 'field': quite broad, can also include digital fieldwork. It can take time to define who/what and where are the people/objects you want to study and work with.	Possibility to do several shorter fieldwork trips instead of a long period of fieldwork = help define what are the goals of the field research, who and where are the participants/gatekeepers, help to build relationships. Importance of the time period between these fieldwork seasons, which can also be considered as part of the fieldwork (contacts with the participants). Cathartic practice of writing about the fieldwork experience, to unpack what was experienced in the field, what mistakes were made and what can be learnt from them.
Complexity of 'becoming friends' with the participants/gatekeepers, and struggle to build relationships; how to be involved in a meaningful way with the community you work with. Misunderstandings and miscommunications which can lead to conflict situations. Being perceived as an 'expert'	Try to reflect on what kind of 'threat' you could constitute to your participants, understand the local power dynamics and how you fit into them = reflect on your own positionality, and how it can also shift.
Gender issues	Each gender comes with its own advantages and disadvantages when it comes to gaining access to places and participants; comply with the local rules, let people think what they want rather than impose yourself, try to accept and navigate the situations accordingly. Remember that the body/sexuality of the researcher is often considered as fenced off from the whole fieldwork experience, but it is in reality part of any interaction.

Efficient note taking and recording. Worry that participants will only tell you what they think would please you.	Accept that it is impossible to record/write down everything. Possibility to work with 2 notebooks (one that is rather a journal about personal reflections and feelings, the other about factual data, what participants said etc.). Try to settle a form of routine to transcribe your notes and thoughts on a regular basis. Find creative ways to engage with participants, not only through interviews. Avoid asking straight away participants for information, get to know the people first and build relationships.

Panel 2: Mental Health before, during and after fieldwork

Issues encountered/points raised	What can be done about it
Loss of independence, loss of control. Safety and security: dangerous environments, political context, topic of research, gender issues. Health: illnesses in the field. Financial uncertainties (especially in times of illness) Social isolation.	Set your limits, realistic limits. Discuss them and re-adjust them if necessary. How far do you want to/can you go out of your comfort zone? Try to identify the signs that tell you you are not fine anymore. Remember that it is always ok to come home. Insurance: make an appointment with the insurance representative before leaving to talk through the possible scenarios.
Lack of adequate support due to friends and family unable to understand and judge the context adequately and therefore not offering the right support needed	Include friends and family that will be the support during fieldwork. Make sure they are aware of the kind of support you may need/want, have conversations before leaving, reflect with them together, make sure they know that fieldwork is different from an adventurous holiday.
"Supervisor lottery": some supervisors are more supportive and committed than others. What 'safety net' does the university	Well-being team at the university: should be there before, during and after fieldwork

fieldwork *Support group*

offer when the supervisory team is absent during fieldwork?	
Coming back: difficulties of settling back, similar symptoms of PTSD in some cases. Necessity to talk about the fieldwork experience, but to whom?	Reflections after fieldwork, set appointments with well-being team for everyone returning from fieldwork (to avoid feeling of 'failure' when someone needs support)
Discrepancy between the Risk Assessment form and the actual realities of the field: We say in our Risk Assessment that we have a support system (Family, Friends) in place, but is this really the case? Did we really think all scenarios through? Same for health issues or logistics. We state in our Risk Assessment that we will not take taxis in the dark, but if an opportunity comes up to interview someone in the evening, we still do it.	Make the Risk Assessment and Ethical Clearance procedure more realistic and really take the time to talk all scenarios through with the ethics board, supervisory team but also your support network, insurance representative at university, well-being team potentially, etc.

Panel 3: Fieldwork now and then: how can universities better face the realities of the field?

Issues encountered/points raised	What can be done about it
The practice of fieldwork itself may not have changed much, but the profile of PhD students doing fieldwork has (more female, diverse, various needs, disabilities, etc.). However still a problematic view of the heroic lone fieldworker	Try to find a balance for supervisors between giving independence and autonomy to the students, without it being perceived as a lack of care. Demystify the practice of fieldwork.
Fieldwork requires peer support, a plan, but also preparation for various scenarios beyond the plan. How can the University prepare students for such a variety of experiences?	Encourage students to reach out to other people and engage with the uncertainty of doing a PhD, not only with the supervisory team but also with peers. Embrace your position as a young scholar, get in touch with other researchers who are close to your topic, reach out, embrace

| | uncertainty and try to think productively about it.

Create a database/resource providing a list of contacts (local universities, network, etc.) and general guidance for different countries where students are conducting/have conducted fieldwork.

Organise fieldwork exercises/ mock-situations in Norwich to be better prepared.

Possible training on communication skills |
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| How do we understand the anxiety around research? How can we work on it and who should come in/step back to help? | Suggestion to reverse the supervisor/supervisee relationship by inviting the supervisor in the field (when possible): inversion of the expertise, more human way to address the PhD research project.
Set up a semi-formal system of peer-mentoring between PhD students who have already conducted fieldwork and PhD students starting their research projects. |
| How does the bureaucracy impacts the practice of fieldwork and research more generally? | Provide administrative support, especially for international students who might not be familiar with the UK jargon and UEA administrative system.

Create a centralised resource that students can access, providing all the documents needed (for ethical clearance, risk assessment, insurance etc.) as well as more practical inputs and advice. |
| Need for productive conversations that address the fear of failure among PGRs that go on fieldwork | In the end what matter is to 'be good enough', accept to talk about the fieldwork experience sincerely and in a realistic way. Create space for supervisors in this conversation |

V) Recommendations

<u>Recommendations raised during the event</u>

- A platform that provides a resource base which contains all documents, processes and practical input that is needed for fieldwork. We have created a google drive folder which addresses this issue for now, but in the future we would like to move this to Blackboard where it is accessible to all PGRs.

- Create a more sustainable and accessible platform to enable communication. At the moment we use Slack to connect the support group which is not ideal (limited storage and needs to be accessed through a link/invitation). Microsoft Teams could be an alternative.

- More training on fieldwork skills. This fieldwork training should come from various sources, Faculty departments and PPD sessions but also perhaps with a more centralised offer via the Doctoral College.

- Peer mentoring and support: informal and formal. Lunch, coffee, regular meetups but also more formal mentoring schemes, possibly between PGRs who have already undertaken fieldwork and PGRs who are about to, and training (for instance on interview skills, note taking, photography and filming in the field, first aid, etc.). Importance of offering face-to-face training and mentoring rather than only online PPD sessions.

- A check-up session for each PGR that returns from fieldwork where the student can be supported in their process of "coming back" which is in many cases very difficult, and where it can be assessed whether the student needs further support. It needs to be identified which structure is best suited for this (Well-being service? Or someone from each Faculty department, a designated fieldwork representative?)

<u>Recommendations from the committee</u>

- Based on the feedback we received from the participants, we recommend to continue this event and run it at least once a year as the absolute minimum to ensure that students are aware of potential issues surrounding fieldwork. For next year and the future this event should be organized by the University, not PGRs (unless it is a designated role with payment, could be connected to one of the student positions at the SU)

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- Establish an overview/database of the students who are going on fieldwork, which could then help connect the students with each other.

- The departments that are the most affected by fieldwork (DEV, AMA (SRU), ENV, BIO, NBS etc.) are urged to rethink and restructure their support offered for PGRs. The situation today is that the main burden is placed on supervisors- but if the supervisory team does not offer the adequate support this becomes problematic. Students that are particularly vulnerable (fieldwork in extreme contexts, female PGRs that are conducting solo fieldwork in developing countries, students with disabilities and special needs, etc.) need to receive particular care and support, and the supervisory team cannot be expected to cover for it.

- We would again like to reiterate that it needs to be ensured that all input and initiatives regarding this group needs to move from the work and effort of PGRs to more established channels. PGRs are affected by high intensity workload. On top of this "regular" workload, PGRs who conduct fieldwork have even more tasks to take care of which also contributes to this feeling of fieldwork anxiety (financial organization, visa, vaccines, organizing logistics, reading up on country specific literature and reports, risk assessment, ethical clearance,...). Hence, it needs to be ensured that this support group should not become a burden for students who are already encountering numerous challenges.

VI) Next Steps and Conclusion

This event, and this report, should be the beginning of a more fundamental transition towards more sustainable support for students going on fieldwork. For now the focus has been on PhD researchers, but it needs to be acknowledged that in some cases undergraduate, postgraduate and early career academics may need support for fieldwork.

We hope that this report will reach the right channels that not only welcome this initiative, but that also will embrace it and translate these findings practically. Although our committee is open to offer support in this transition, we would like to reduce our input due to time constraints and rather focus on offering the informal support for now.

We would also appreciate if the readers of the report could help us in spreading the message and in assisting us in widening our network by reaching PGRs that are doing fieldwork across the departments.

For further questions about this report or any input regarding our initiative, please send us an email:

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