

THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS

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Through fieldwork and travel I became a geographer. Exploring the relationship between people and their environments, be they familiar settings or exotic ones, is a prime privilege of this profession. I think of fieldwork as the lifeblood of my academic career, the stuff that revs me up for another year of teaching, writing, and administration. In the field, theory is grounded; there, rigid theory becomes supple. Experiences in the field add legitimacy and relevance to work in the classroom.

On a personal level, fieldwork restores my deep sense of wonder at the diverse ways in which humans create their homes on earth, despite enormous obstacles. Granted, I've worked in beautiful places—the cays of Belize, the Mexican highlands, and the Andes of Venezuela and Bolivia. Save for one or two unpleasant episodes, I've been fortunate during my various field excursions. That said, much of what goes on in the field is not discussed, either formally or informally. This frustrated me as a graduate student, and it still frustrates me even though I've tallied twenty years of experience and I send my own students into the field. Most of what I've learned was through trial and error, beginning as a budget traveler hitchhiking in Europe and Africa and evolving into a more seasoned scholarship of transnational research in Virginia and Bolivia.

Most field geographers of my generation seem to have acquired field skills on their own, for courses on field methods are seldom offered in American geography departments. Once they may have been standard fare, but when I entered graduate school in the 1980s such topics were subsumed in the all-purpose and oft-dreaded research-methods courses that posed mainly theoretical and epistemological questions. Research design generally assumed an availability of large data sets and controlled environments. Qualitative methods were given short shrift: unscientific, soft. Occasional discussions might rate “insider” versus “outsider” perspectives or address the “objectifying” of our “subjects.” Though valid graduate-seminar topics, these tended to have a curare-like effect, paralyzing future field researchers. Underlying all was a message: Engaging real-world people is too messy and problematic, and it is generally much safer to theorize the perspectives of women, minorities, or subalterns than to talk with them.

Graduate students were encouraged to read the landscape and were given some guidance for doing so in the uplands and plains of central New York State. It takes little to convince geographers that much can be learned from careful observation of the human environment. With practice we became skilled at classifying landscape types, photographing them, and mining historical records and photographs to interpret landscape evolution. Oddly, these valuable and challenging field exercises

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typically ignored people. The nitty-gritty of how to get people to talk about their environment was not viewed as necessary. Geography has proved strangely mute on the subject of interacting with people in the field, which probably has much to do with the discipline's origin as a natural science concerned with describing and classifying the physical environment. Unlike ethnographers, who base their life's work on the confidences of individuals, geographers seem reluctant to admit how much we rely on the kindness of strangers to conduct our field studies.

It is difficult to argue with the notion that the most important thing one can bring into the field is luck (Parsons 1977). A little luck in life is always welcome! Luck, however, is not a teachable concept; nor is relying on it really a sound methodology. Reliance on luck and a reluctance to discuss field methods leave many young geographers with the mistaken idea that only the lucky should venture into the field; the rest should stay home. But luck usually comes from building contacts and relationships in the places where we do our research, by talking with people about our work and involving them in it, and by finding ways to give back to the people who help us. Reflecting on my own field experiences, I came to recognize three trusted strategies that I've used over the years. They involve approaches to representation, acceptance, and communication.

REPRESENTATION: BREAK DOWN BARRIERS

The ongoing discourse about how to represent the people we study has illuminated the many hazards of turning subjects into an orientalized Other. Ironically, the act of doing fieldwork usually places the researcher in the position of being the Other. In the first minutes, hours, or even days of fieldwork most researchers feel trepidation about being an outsider, a stranger on the scene, looked upon with suspicion or even avoided. And in all fairness, the sense of being a stranger may never completely go away; it just becomes less pronounced as one's work and presence become more commonplace.

Getting used to being a stranger is not easy. I'm reminded of this each time I begin interviews in Northern Virginia with a new Latino soccer league, where both my gender and my ethnicity prevent me from blending in with the crowd. My first move is to introduce myself to the team captain or league organizer. It is critical to convey the purpose of a research project in simple and clear language that piques interest and invites cooperation. Don't underestimate the value of a business card that shows an institutional affiliation and provides contact information. For good reasons, informants may often be suspicious of strangers, yet I've often found that people will later talk to me at their convenience when they know how to reach me. Keep going back; familiarity with a researcher fosters acceptance.

Finally, the best way to be represented is through association, and having members of the community involved with a research project is especially helpful. It was through a Bolivian friend that I was introduced to a community leader who was eager to have the Bolivian community's accomplishments written about and recognized. He kept me updated on Bolivian immigrant cultural events and introduced

me to a broad spectrum of Bolivian American social groups, from beauty-pageant organizations to village-based associations and soccer leagues. The benefit of community involvement is that some of my research, such as maps that show immigrant residential patterns or reports on the need for more recreational spaces, has been useful to the participants.

As my life situation has changed, so too has my relationship to the field. In retrospect, age has many advantages when doing fieldwork. As a young, single woman I often drew unwanted attention from men, which sometimes made gaining the information I wanted awkward. Women, too, could be wary, worried that a young, foreign researcher was in pursuit of something other than data. Once a woman who worked with me in Venezuela shared a short story she had written. In it a gringa researcher came into a village, and one by one all the young men began to disappear. Eventually only women, children, and old men were left. The implications of this magic realism tale did not need to be spelled out. From my experience as a young traveler, I knew that appearance and image mattered. I countered these concerns by dressing modestly, never socializing alone with men, and consciously tying myself to the daily lives of women and their children.

The benefit of maturity is that most of these problems no longer exist. I have gone into the field with my husband and children. In fact, the very boundaries of the field have blurred as I find myself working with Latino immigrants in my own community in Northern Virginia, often conducting interviews at neighborhood soccer fields with my family in tow. Even when I work in Latin America, the common concerns of motherhood seem to break down barriers and reduce suspicions. Chats about parenting or showing off photographs of children provide entry into a traditionally conceived Latino culture in which one of the principal roles of women is that of mother. Being a member of that club makes me a little less strange. Clearly there are many levels of acceptance, and I'm not advocating some naive universality of motherhood or trying to make normative judgments about women's roles in society. Nevertheless, I've found that being a middle-aged mother has made me more understandable and acceptable to the Latino communities where I work. Then again, maybe field research just gets easier with practice.

ACCEPTANCE: MEET THE WOMEN OF THE HOUSE

In most settings a woman researcher doing an extended field study needs to be accepted, or at least tolerated, by the women in the community (Figure 1). Of course, the same may be said of men working with men. Perhaps this is an obvious point, but it was never clearly put to me. This is true even if the subjects of the study are not women. When I was doing fieldwork on lobster cooperatives in Belize, most of the data I needed came from interviews with men in several small villages (Price 1987). Things greatly improved when a family took me in as a paying houseguest and I started to help out with cooking, changing beds—the family ran a small hotel, so there were always beds to change—and tutoring their children in math and English. After a couple of weeks of seemingly unproductive time, the women of the

house decided I was serious about my work. They arranged for me to go fishing with their husbands and brothers. They made sure I was introduced to leaders of the cooperative. They also insisted that I go to church with them. It was women



FIG. 1—Sabina Paz and Marie Price, about to share a libation of *chicha* (corn beer) in La Loma, Cochabamba, Bolivia. (Photograph by the author, July 1999)

who gave me access to the male-dominated world of fishing. Wives made their husbands and brothers accountable for my welfare when I was out on the water. And once the men became interested in my work they provided access to other fishermen. Yet in the evenings, after a day of fishing or conducting surveys on the docks, I returned to the world of women: playing card games, chatting about the latest soap opera, gossiping about men, worrying about children. It is important not to assume a sense of sisterhood among women, a point underscored by Lynn Staeheli

and Vicki Lawson (1994, 97). At the same time, it is essential that a female researcher build relationships with women in her study sites, especially in contexts where the social lives of men and women tend to be segregated.

Staying in hotels is the least appealing aspect of fieldwork, so I encourage fieldworkers, be they men or women, to live with families whenever possible. Hotel life for a lone woman researcher can be especially isolating, and it can result in much unwanted attention. I'm referring mostly to the inexpensive hotels where graduate students and some academics stay. In one memorable hotel in Dangriga, Belize, the sign above my door listed fourteen rules, including: "Walking around nude in this hotel is not allowed," "Please no spitting on the floor," "No hookers are allowed in the room," and "Smoking weed or marijuana is not allowed"! I made it through two nights without breaking any of the rules, but I can't say the same for the other guests.

In nearly every town and city in Latin America, women offer lodging in their homes. One needs only to ask around. Living in homes with families offers a completely different and far superior experience. There is a rhythm in a household, the ebb and flow of kids and meals, of roosters and cows. In Latin America, perhaps more than most places, family connections are important and extended families are huge. Through staying with families I've become a godmother, sung folk songs late into the night, chased an iguana out of a kitchen, and been enchanted by the reminiscences of senior members of the household. While renting a room in an apartment in Mérida, Venezuela, I met an environmentalist working for a nongovernmental organization in the city, a chance meeting that sparked my later interest in environmental organizations in Latin America (Price 1994). By staying with a family in Cochabamba, Bolivia, I met a cousin who was a pilot; he was able to arrange a flight over my study area so I could photograph it. Not all of the things I've learned by being a houseguest have had a direct bearing on my research, but these experiences have opened doors, elicited insights, and led to treasured friendships. Being part of a household, albeit only temporarily, is also more consistent with social expectations for women in Latin America.

COMMUNICATION: USE PHOTOGRAPHS .

Photographs are vital tools that bring a lecture to life or illustrate a field discovery with clarity. In the classroom they are invaluable, offering students a visual sense of place and provoking questions that might not otherwise be asked. Field geographers use cameras, and some are quite good photographers. Most will admit there is some awkwardness in introducing a camera into a group of strangers, especially in a foreign country. Common sense dictates that one should first ask permission to photograph people and then abide by their wishes. Being married to a photojournalist, Rob Crandall, has heightened my sensitivity to the power of photographs, and I've learned about photographing people by working with him. Between the two of us, we have an impressive slide collection. Year after year, when course evaluations are made, students comment on how much they have enjoyed and learned from the slides I show in class.

What is often overlooked is that photographs themselves can be important tools for dialogue in the field. I first saw the significance of photographs as research tools when an anthropology student at George Washington University wrote an ethnographic study of a Yucatecan village based on historical photographs salvaged from a village portrait studio. In asking villagers to talk about the people and scenes shown in the images, Viviana Batzella was able to construct a complex portrait of village life and how it had changed since the 1940s (1993). Using photographs in her research gave her an ethnographic advantage: People wanted to talk to her because they enjoyed looking at the pictures and trying to decipher who or what was in them.

It was by accident rather than design that I began to use pictures in my study of transnational communities. After returning from a two-week field survey in Bolivia, I brought a book of photographs to show to the Bolivian organizers of a soccer league in Northern Virginia. I soon had the enviable experience of people seeking me out to look at the pictures and then talk about what they saw. Mostly they were looking for friends or family, but as they flipped through the photographs general comments about land and life unfolded. The aerial photographs I took were especially valuable because they led to environmental comments about climate change, soil erosion, and changes in land use. People would be especially interested in photographs taken from a light aircraft because they offered a different perspective on their village surroundings. Through photographs, normally reticent immigrants began to talk about their life in Bolivia and compare it with life in the United States. Sometimes what resulted was the story of an individual shown in an image; other pictures might draw comments about village life in general. Some people were disappointed that I didn't have pictures of their community, but that led to conversations about how their particular village was special and why I should go there on my next trip. Others became very emotional when they recognized a family member; in a few cases tears were shed.

Because a large number of my interviewees have been unable to return to Bolivia due to the expense of the trip or to their legal status, they are hungrier for images from home than other informants might be. Even so, I suspect that photographs can be useful for a variety of research purposes, at the very least as icebreakers to get people talking about their lives in particular settings. Twice I have given slide shows to Bolivian organizations, and these too have allowed me to share my research and receive input from community members. By sharing these images of Bolivia I became not just another researcher interested in immigrants but someone who knew something about a distant home. Pictures forged a link that allowed us to talk about other matters.

In contrast, photographs of Bolivians in the United States have been less useful during my interviews with households in Bolivia. Unless the photograph is of a family member or a friend, the images themselves do not resonate. The lesson is that photographs need to have meaning for the viewer if they are to be a research tool. For people who have not been to the United States the pictures have little

meaning and are of minor interest. This point is underscored by the more enthusiastic responses I received from people who have been to the United States: They quickly name urban landmarks, popular soccer leagues, dance groups, or restaurants. Access to migrant households in Bolivia typically comes from my contacts with relatives in Northern Virginia. In studying transnational communities, I have become a link in this spatial network, bringing notes, gifts, and videotapes to family members who are divided by the global labor market. Using photographs in various stages of my research was one of the tools that helped me establish these linkages.

SHARING THE FIELD: REPAY KINDNESSES

In conversations with other academics about this essay, the term "war stories" was tossed around, usually in the context of, "So you're going to tell your war stories!" The more I encountered the phrase, the more it bothered me. It connotes an encounter with an enemy Other, which the researcher survives with tales of adventure. In an incisive essay about feminist fieldwork in geography, Cindy Katz also refers to academics' tales of their travels as "the scholarly equivalent of war stories" (1994, 68). Such a label, I fear, dismisses personal accounts of field experiences as indulgent or self-serving. My regret is that there are too few accounts by geographers of the issues and experiences derived from field study—something this special issue of the *Geographical Review* addresses. And because of this, a great deal of field experience and training is not being passed down. Sharing the field is essential both in the training of future researchers and as a means of giving something back to those who have helped us.

In terms of scholarship, accounts that illuminate the complexities and rewards of the field experience without overstating the heroics of a geographical researcher are seldom produced.¹ If such a body of work existed, it would undoubtedly exalt the need for flexibility, patience, collaboration, humility, chance, and reciprocity. It would also nudge scholars, young and old, to reconsider the value of a field-driven approach at a time when the technological advances in geography are viewed as tempting replacements for on-the-ground experience. The intricacies of field techniques and the ethical questions they pose should be as much a part of a modern geographical education as are GIS and remote sensing. By explicitly incorporating field experiences into our writing and teaching, the importance of this time-tested means of gathering geographical information will become less mysterious and its relevance more vital.

Most field researchers, at different stages in their careers, address the issue of relevance. Invariably researchers are drawn to the field to answer academic questions. Some topics may be historical in nature, others ecological or cultural, but most findings do not immediately improve the lives of the peoples studied. The desire for field research to have a positive influence stems from a sense of obligation, a desire to give back to the communities and localities that sustain our academic pursuits. But it is difficult to match the particular needs of a community with the theoretical concerns of the academy.

Geographers need to reach out to a larger audience with their research findings. This can be done by through public talks, speaking to government officials, or giving interviews with local newspapers. For example, last spring three colleagues and I wrote a report for the Brookings Institution that detailed where immigrants were residing in the Washington Metropolitan Area (Singer and others 2001). By reaching out to the policy world, our research became accessible to government officials, union organizers, lawmakers, religious leaders, and immigrant activists. Each of these groups found this information useful in serving its constituents. Moreover, through public talks about our work, different groups offered input into our research and, more important, encouraged us to consider specific questions, such as access to housing or transportation, in our future studies.

Reciprocity can also occur at a more personal level. A benefit of long-term involvement in a field project is that one gets to know people. Through the study of Bolivian immigration I have been able to sponsor cultural exchanges, support fundraising activities, help newcomers find employment, assist organizations in proposal writing, and foster important friendships. To be honest, what I actually write will be of little interest to the immigrants themselves.

The full measure of fieldwork is not simply the published article but the entire process. The relationships established, the dialogues that ensue, the institutional means to support or publicize community issues or activities are all ways to acknowledge the kindnesses bestowed on us. It is this process that continues to enrich my life and, hopefully, adds something to those who have helped me along the way.

NOTE

1. Bernard Nietschmann's *Between Land and Water* (1973) is a notable exception. A deeply personal account of the human ecology of the Miskito people of Nicaragua, it offers an example for others to follow. It was one of my favorite books as an undergraduate. Only later did I appreciate what an anomaly it was for Nietschmann to have surrendered his objective, scholarly voice and reveal his experiences as a field researcher with his family among the turtle fishermen of the western Caribbean.

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TITLE: The kindness of strangers
SOURCE: The Geographical Review 91 no1/2 Ja/Ap 2001
WN: 0100103133019

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