

What is it like to teach qualitative methods to graduate students in predominantly quantitative departments? We draw on our experiences teaching fieldwork in three departments to show that folk notions of science—ideas about how scientific work should be done—make it difficult to teach an inductive approach to fieldwork. Specifically, these folk notions make it hard for students to take an open approach to their studies, use their emotions in developing their analyses, and write ongoing analyses of their field notes. Throughout the article, we offer strategies for dealing with students' resistance.

Abstract

QUALITATIVELY DIFFERENT

Teaching Fieldwork to Graduate Students

SHERRYL KLEINMAN
MARTHA A. COPP
KARLA A. HENDERSON

What am I looking for? Sometimes I get a nervous pang in my stomach when I think to myself that fieldwork is so undirected, especially since I want to make a thesis out of it. . . . I must admit that I would feel better if I knew where I was going. . . . It is always comforting to feel like you have some grounding. I feel like I'm floating now.

A graduate student in one of our fieldwork classes freewrote this comment early in the semester.¹ This student captured well the feelings of many other students—and perhaps even experienced field-workers—in the early stages of a project.

AUTHORS' NOTE: The first author gives special thanks to Howard Becker, whose graduate courses in fieldwork and writing have inspired and guided her own teaching over the years. We thank Howard Aldrich, Howard Becker, Amy Blank, Jane Brown, Craig Calhoun, James Copp, James Dowd, Marcy Lansman, Prue Rains, Jane Sell, Michael Schwalbe, William Shaffir, Barbara Smalley, Jeff Supplee, John Van Maanen, and Fabienne Worth for their comments on earlier drafts. We are grateful to the graduate students in our classes who gave us permission to use their freewritings. Direct all correspondence to Sherryl Kleinman, Department of Sociology, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3210. E-mail: kleinman@gibbs.oit.unc.edu.

JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY ETHNOGRAPHY, Vol. 25 No. 4, January 1997 469-499
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Why are students uncomfortable? On the first day of class, we make students choose a group or setting to study throughout the semester and have them begin their fieldwork immediately. Students hand in field notes by the second week, writing down everything they saw or heard. We also ask them to hand in commentary (notes-on-notes) about everything they found interesting in their field notes. We tell them they need not know at the outset what others have written about the setting or group or which theory they will use.

Few students are grateful for this opportunity to jump into the unknown. Students have learned from their quantitative courses that to do "real science," they should do an exhaustive search of the literature, come up with a problem and hypotheses, write a proposal, and then collect data to see if their guesses were right. Students also believe that they should put aside their feelings about the group they will study and that they should not write a word of analysis until they have finished collecting data.²

These folk notions of science—ideas about how scientific work should be done—are ingrained in our students. As teachers and advisers of students doing fieldwork, we provoke the fears and resistance of students who believe we not only violate the scientific canon but unfairly put them in an anxiety-producing situation. They think we are sending them into the woods without a compass.³

Yet some students learn that uncertainty can be exciting. One student in our class wrote,

What questions are interesting seem to change with each session [in the field]. This whole process is a slow and evolving one, quite contrary to the quantitative work I'm used to (not that quantitative is fast, it just seems more focused, though maybe that is an illusion). I am enjoying the richer experience of this qualitative work, and feel I am learning more about the subjects than is possible in any quantitative methodology.

How can we get more students to find uncertainty exciting rather than scary? We are still learning. What follows are some of the things we have done in the classroom that might help.⁴

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The image of the research at every turn

LOSING CONTROL

Some of us look back fondly at the time when we were students. We did not yet have the burden of being experts—those who are supposed to know everything. Students can make mistakes, even fall on their faces. But in our nostalgia we forget that as graduate students, we experienced a lot of anxiety and uncertainty (Mechanic 1962). We had to pass exams and prove ourselves to professors, those who had a lot of control over our lives and our livelihoods (see Egan 1989; Kleinman 1983; Sanford 1976).

Graduate students are school wise. They have done well taking tests and writing term papers for many years and have become invested in being good students. Fieldwork, they recognize, is different from the kinds of work they have done before, and they worry that they will not do it right, let alone well. Understandably, students seek comfort by trying to control what they can in this new task, beginning with their choice of a setting. They believe there is a short list of perfect settings, and if they choose "the right one," they will succeed. As one student put it in his freewriting, "I want to have *exactly* the right group. I want to pick the *best* group." And his classmate wrote,

I want to do a *good* project. I want it to be interesting, to be meaningful. I want to take *good notes* and make good observations. I want it to "flow." (I fear a dud) I fear reaching the end of the semester and feeling utterly defeated because my project has yielded no substantive sociological information, no compelling revelations, not even fieldnotes which could appeal to the prurient interest!

Students are also aware of the competitive nature of schooling, a context where they have pretty much come out on top in earlier years. They fear that they will find themselves doing worse than their peers in this kind of work. As one student freewrote, "I'm perhaps a little intimidated. Will I choose a good setting? Will I do as well as the others? Same old questions."

The image of the researcher as someone who controls the research at every turn provides comfort for graduate students.

The familiar One way students try to have control is by choosing a site that they know well (e.g., nursing students who study hospital wards). The students know they will have an easy time getting access, will feel comfortable with participants, and probably will not run into any events or characters they do not already have categories for. They like the feeling of control that comes with familiarity, but they also worry that they will have trouble being objective. Consistent with one folk belief about science, they consider their knowledge of and experiences in the setting as sources of bias that they hope to get rid of. They want to erase prior knowledge and become blank slates as they reenter the site in their field-worker role.

Break out We encourage students to choose a setting with which they have some, but not a lot of, familiarity. For most of us, but especially for first-time field-workers, it is hard to notice patterns in a setting where one has learned to take so much for granted (but see Lofland and Lofland 1995, 11-15). So we suggested that a nursing student who was interested in fertility study a Lamaze class that met outside the hospital. And we had a social science student who was interested in gender and communication study a hospital ward where she watched interactions among doctors, nurses, and patients.

Key Although we discourage students from hanging around a setting they know well, we also make it clear to them that a human being cannot be a blank slate and that this is a plus rather than a liability. Whether through experience, readings, television shows, or films, they have some expectations of the setting or its participants. They also have some "working hypotheses" (Geer 1967), ideas about how things will look, feel, and work in the setting.

Another way that students try to control their research is by reading whatever has been written on their group or setting. Students have learned from their undergraduate and graduate courses to value grand theory and published studies over direct experience. They believe that if they read enough and think long enough before they step into the field, they will come out of the experience with a worthwhile study. Students see studies of the setting or grand theory—knowledge already legitimated in the

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We tell studen setting, whether important is to b use those under setting. Some of consistent with w good comparison stereotypical or ir already think or l tations before the detail in the next

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eyes of esteemed others—as objective renderings of the social world. Hence they believe that the literature cannot bias their research; only direct experience does that.

We tell students that having prior knowledge of the group or setting, whether through reading or experience, is fine. What is important is to become *aware* of what they know so they can use those understandings as they try to make sense of the setting. Some of their prior understandings may turn out to be consistent with what they observe, some of them may provide good comparisons or contrasts, and others may prove to be stereotypical or irrelevant. To get students to examine what they already think or know, we make them write about their expectations before they step into the field (we discuss this in more detail in the next section).

Most students feel uncomfortable starting fieldwork with so little knowledge of the setting and the method. Their anxiety leads them to ask questions about what, specifically, we want from them. Their expectation is understandable after years of psyching out professors (Becker, Geer, and Hughes 1968) and figuring out what each one wants them to say in class or write in their term papers. We use that same model to get them to feel comfortable with what feels like a loss of control over what they are doing. We tell students that they can impress us to the extent that they fail to develop a narrow focus and instead remain open to many questions. They learn that they can be successful in this class only if they are willing to be dumb—to have what Zen teachers call “beginner’s mind.” We tell them that mistakes are good and that without mistakes they won’t learn. For instance, if they ask a question a participant “misunderstands,” they will learn what those words mean in the setting or group that person belongs to. “Everything is data” becomes the motto of the course. To do well in this class, we tell students, they must write and talk about their mistakes. Hence being vulnerable in the worst ways students can imagine (e.g., admitting that they made the wrong assumption, said the wrong thing, asked the wrong question) becomes valuable and the ticket to success. We rely on former students to spread the word that we mean what we say.

