THE SAGE HANDBOOK

of

FIELDWORK
To Bridgette Mack and Janet Lauritsen, for their wise counsel and enduring friendship

Richard Wright

To Sue, Pat and Nik

Dick Hobbs
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Preface

Fieldwork refers to the research practice of engaging with others on their own turf, exotic or otherwise, in order to describe their cultural practices, understandings and beliefs. It takes many forms and is conducted in a myriad of settings by social scientists working within a wide variety of academic disciplines. Common to all fieldwork is a desire to understand the social worlds inhabited by others as they understand those worlds, that is, in terms of the meanings they ascribe to their everyday actions and experiences. As such, fieldwork is a profoundly personal research strategy; even in its most passive forms, it typically requires some participation in the lives of others, often on unfamiliar ground, with all of the unforeseeable contingencies that characterise any human interaction.

As a result, fieldworkers operate on uncertain terrain, in essence acting as ‘professional strangers’, though the extent of their marginality will depend on such things as their personal history and the specific culture being studied. Strangeness and distance were distinguishing characteristics of nineteenth century anthropology. The colonial context of anthropological studies carried out during this era meant that fieldworkers typically did their ‘research’ abroad and seldom shared cultural perspectives with members of the studied population. Fieldworkers were detached from their informants and tended to regard native cultures as exotic and essentially inferior. As a consequence, the gathering of data often comprised little more than the acquisition of cultural artefacts.

A more self conscious, less colonially-oriented approach to fieldwork emerged during the first half of the twentieth century. This development can be linked to the rise of the so-called Chicago School of sociology, which combined the rigour of European theory and classical anthropology, with a concern to locate and engage with the social problems of rapidly evolving urban settings. Fieldworkers became members, associates and fringe members of urban subcultures, groups, and gangs. They lived in urban neighbourhoods and filtered cultural activity through the lens of their own experiences of complex and rapidly changing social settings. Echoing Henry Mayhew’s forays into nineteenth century London, and influenced by the campaigning work of Jacob Riis and Lincoln Steffens, a fertile academic tradition was born.

That tradition is alive and well, as the contributions to this volume amply demonstrate. Today, even the quantitatively oriented social scientists are beginning to recognise the critical importance of fieldwork for understanding how people perceive and interpret their own actions and experiences in the context of distinct cultural and subcultural settings. They have come to understand that fieldwork can expose and explain social worlds that are veiled by their cultural or geographical remoteness or camouflaged by over-familiarity. This is not to suggest, however, that fieldwork is without its problems and critics. The inevitable involvement of fieldworkers in the lives of those they study poses vexing methodological and ethical questions. In regard to method, for example, there is a longstanding concern that the presence
of a fieldworker unavoidably alters the social situation being studied, and that the more successful fieldworkers are in reducing the perceived distance between themselves and those they are studying, the less ‘objective’ they become in gathering and reporting their data. In writing up accounts of their research, fieldworkers inevitably must pick and choose what to report and serious questions have been raised about the extent to which such choices reveal more about the observer than the observed.

But the methodological questions associated with fieldwork pale in relation to the ethical dilemmas arising from its practice. Immersion in the field implicates the fieldworker and places a range of responsibilities on the fieldwork enterprise that are not apparent in the everyday practices of alternative, less personally involving methodologies. In addition, the ethnographic realities of everyday physical and emotional existence in the field can involve negotiating hazards that are often exacerbated by the fieldworker’s non-familiarity with the physical and cultural environment.

Many of the contributors to this volume have struggled with these issues in real world fieldwork settings and their reports make for compelling and instructive reading. Perhaps more than any other social science research methodology, fieldwork can only be fully appreciated through the interpretive lens of the investigator, which is hardly surprising given that it is the only method in which researcher and instrument are one and the same. That realisation is what prompted us to propose a handbook devoted exclusively to the practice of fieldwork. Part science, part art, there likely will never be an accepted standard for what constitutes first-rate fieldwork. Instead, that ground will remain hotly contested, with various ethnographic camps offering differing perspectives on and approaches to the fieldwork enterprise. All of those camps are represented in the chapters that follow, as are the new and emerging fields in which they have staked their claims.
Part 1

Locating FieldWork