



Where is the Field?

*The Experience of Migration Viewed through
the Prism of Ethnographic Fieldwork*

Edited by
Laura Hirvi and Hanna Snellman

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Introduction: Nine Tales of the Field

Ethnographers seek to achieve a better understanding of the human experience through the exploration of different kinds of life worlds by conducting fieldwork. This method is often understood to include interviews, participant observation, informal conversations and the recording of field notes along the way. Thanks to its ability to assist in highlighting the interplay between global processes and (trans-)locally lived lives, ethnographic fieldwork methods have also been found valuable in research on human migration. However, when setting out to gather their data, researchers who are eager to explore the experiences of migrants and their descendants often come across stumbling blocks for which their academic training as ethnographers has not adequately prepared them. This edited volume does not seek to provide a comprehensive answer to the question of how to deal with such challenges that not only apprentice ethnographers but also more experienced scholars encounter in the course of carrying out their fieldwork; instead, it offers the reader nine ‘tales of the field.’¹ These tales, which have been written by both junior and more experienced scholars working in different parts of the globe, bring to the fore the various moments of online and offline encounters that take place between fieldworkers and the people they encounter. In addition, the contributions to this volume contain the authors’ reflections on how they have dealt with the obstacles, challenges and also the opportunities that they have encountered in the course of their fieldwork endeavours. This book seeks to offer a close-up view of the various coping strategies developed and applied by scholars who are conducting fieldwork and in this vein hopes to serve as a useful resource for future ethnographers who are setting out to study the mysteries, both hidden and overt, of the cultural and social worlds.

1 The work of editing this book has been part of an NOS-HS funded project entitled *Sikh Identity Formation: Generational Transfer of Traditions in the Nordic Countries* (project number 212061). Kristina Myrvold (Lund University, Sweden) is the principal investigator of this project, which began in 2009. The Finnish co-investigator is Hanna Snellman (University of Helsinki), while Laura Hirvi (University of Jyväskylä) has been writing her doctoral dissertation under the auspices of this project.

Recording how individual ethnographers deal with the challenges that they face with regard to their fieldwork is, we believe, an enlightening and relevant venture as it contributes to a process that fosters the development and transmission of ethnographic research skills. As Allaine Cerwonka points out in the first chapter of a volume which she co-authored with her former supervisor, Liisa Malkki, apprentices who are in the process of acquiring skills for conducting fieldwork are often left to figure out certain aspects of the method that 'go without saying' by carefully listening to the tales told by senior fieldworkers.² In a similar vein, Billy Ehn and Orvar Löfgren note how in Sweden it seems that students learn how to become ethnologists by following an unwritten syllabus.³ Often, this 'informal socialization'⁴ of the novice into the art of doing fieldwork takes place outside university classrooms. Information about what ethnographers actually do when they conduct ethnographic fieldwork is commonly disseminated in the form of informal talk after class, sometimes in passing, behind closed doors or over coffee in a department's staff room. In order to be able to catch at least a fragment of this valuable 'corridor talk',⁵ students as well as colleagues who are eager to learn from the experiences of others have to depend in many instances on serendipity and can only hope that they manage to join such random discussions at the right moment in time.

In order to reduce the role of serendipity and to contribute to a growing body of fieldwork methods for 'research in arenas in which Malinowskian conditions of fieldwork are most challenged',⁶ the chapters presented in this volume set out to document in a formal manner some examples of this kind of 'corridor talk' on ethnographic methods. In this way, we hope to facilitate the transmission of fieldwork skills, which would otherwise run the risk of remaining on an oral level or passing unnoticed if they are only published as mandatory parts of doctoral dissertations, which often fail to reach a wider readership. Producing a collection of accounts in which the authors reflect on their use of ethnographic research methods is particularly relevant in the field of migration studies, where, as several contributions to this volume indicate, research is often carried out in contexts that challenge the traditional canon of fieldwork methods. The reason for this is that researchers conducting research on mobile people, who in some of the cases that are discussed in this book have settled in urban environments, often seem to struggle with the task of delimiting their research site in spatial terms. Considering the increasing popularity that the use of fieldwork enjoys in migration studies, we would suggest that there is a need for a book that focuses not only on research methods as applied generally in the study of human migration⁷ but also on ethnographic fieldwork methods in particular.

2 Cerwonka 2007, 3.

3 Ehn & Löfgren 1996.

4 Cerwonka 2007, 3.

5 Marcus 2006, 113.

6 Marcus 2009, 19.

7 See for example Vargas-Silva 2012.

By documenting and highlighting the various ways in which ethnographers who are studying immigrants in different parts of the world not only deal with moments of despair and respond to possible difficulties but also take the opportunities that are presented to them in the course of their fieldwork, this book offers some innovative, creative and concrete examples of how to be flexible and improvise in the field.⁸ Thus, similar to the aim of *Ethnologia Europea*'s recent special issue entitled *Irregular Ethnographies* edited by the Swedish ethnologists Tom O'Dell and Robert Willim, one goal of this volume is to enlarge our understanding of some of the 'diverse forms of ethnographic practice' carried out by ethnographers in the 21st century.⁹ The overall intention of this book is to offer insights into the art of conducting field research that will be equally useful both for students and for more senior researchers working in the field of migration studies and beyond. On a more general level, this book may also be of value for policy-makers and others who are interested in learning more about the experience of migration and how it affects people's everyday lives. The intimate character of many of the accounts included in this book serves to promote this objective.

Furthermore, agreeing with George E. Marcus, who is currently the Director of the *Center for Ethnography* at UC Irvine (USA), we consider 'telling about fieldwork experiences' to be an essential exercise that provides the necessary background to stimulate discussions about ethnographic methods.¹⁰ Ethnographers can only learn how others have coped with similar challenges when their experiences are shared in writing. The possession of such information is maybe beneficial in trying to navigate through one's own fieldwork project. It can be also useful when one writes research proposals since being aware of what may happen in carrying out fieldwork makes 'the dreamer' who writes a research proposal better informed and permits her/him to visualise what a planned fieldwork project might look like. Participation in the process of updating fieldwork methods is important because, as Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson remind us, the art of fieldwork can only ensure its continuity if it adapts to the changing environment, and 'for that to happen, as Malinowski himself pointed out, such tradition must be aggressively and imaginatively reinterpreted to meet the needs of the present'.¹¹

The present, as understood in this volume, manifests itself in the form of globalization, which is characterised by an increase in mobility. This has been furthered by ever cheaper and faster modes of transportation and a higher degree of interconnectedness in the world. Eager to explore what impact globalization has on the everyday lives of ordinary people, scholars from various disciplines have become increasingly interested in investigating the experiences of migrants. This interest has given rise to the emergence of

8 See Malkki 2007 for a thought-provoking discussion of the role that improvisation plays in ethnographic fieldwork.

9 O'Dell & Willim 2011, 12.

10 Marcus 2006, 114.

11 Gupta & Ferguson 1997, 39–40.

an interdisciplinary field that is known today as ‘migration studies’, and it has resulted in the establishment of centres around the world that focus on research related to the topic of human migration. It has also spurred the foundation of multidisciplinary associations¹² and journals¹³ that promote research carried out in the field of migration studies and help to disseminate its findings.

The fact that researchers around the world who are working in different disciplines are contributing to the field of migration studies also becomes evident when one takes a closer look at the backgrounds of the contributors to this volume. We selected the authors’ contributions from approximately twenty abstracts which were received in response to an international ‘Call for papers’ circulated through various mailing lists in autumn 2009. Based on our own research projects, we saw a need for a work in which contributors would examine the experience of labour, migration and labour migration while critically reflecting on their ethnographic fieldwork experiences. Owing to the small number of proposals on the subject of labour, we eventually decided to concentrate on producing a book that on the one hand would examine the life worlds of immigrants in different parts of the globe, and on the other hand critically scrutinize the methods used in carrying out fieldwork in such settings. In other words, this volume arose of our joint interest in producing a work that could function as a handbook of fieldwork methods and at the same time would provide insights into the experiences of migrants. As it stands, this book also represents our modest desire to connect scholars from abroad with the Finnish academic world in general and Finnish ethnology in particular. It also reflects our endeavour to create an academic dialogue that would reach not only across disciplinary boundaries but also across national borders and thereby acknowledge the interconnected (academic) world in which we live.

The field of migration studies accommodates, among others, scholars of history, ethnology, geography, sociology, anthropology, psychology and religious studies. Many of the scholars from these academic backgrounds share an interest in shedding more light on the causes of human migration and the impact it has on people’s lives in order to reach a better understanding of the world we live in. In order to do so, migration scholars are increasingly turning to the method of fieldwork, as it provides an appropriate tool for producing studies that are capable of capturing the perspective of migrants and for describing the complexity of the social and cultural worlds in which they operate. Furthermore, as the contributions to this volume show, using fieldwork as a method in the field of migration studies can produce research that gives a human face to the ways in which the experience of migration affects people’s lives.¹⁴ In the context of Finland, for example, the application

12 See e.g. *The Society for the Study of Ethnic Relations and International Migration (ETMU)* (http://www.etmu.fi/index_eng.html) in Finland.

13 See e.g. the open access *Nordic Journal of Migration Research* (<http://versita.com/njmr/>).

14 See in particular Mapril; Roseman; Vogt, in this volume.

of ethnographic fieldwork methods to the study of human migration has resulted in a number of insightful studies that explore emigration from,¹⁵ and immigration to, Finland¹⁶.

However, as we emphasise, the present conditions in which researchers carry out their fieldwork have significantly changed from the time when Bronislaw Malinowski and his contemporaries carried out their empirical studies, as no longer is the fieldwork site that many of today's researchers encounter one that can be easily explored on foot.¹⁷ As a consequence of these changed conditions, ethnographers are often left with an uncertain feeling when it comes to the question of what research practices to apply in the name of ethnographic fieldwork methods. Is, for example, talking on the phone to an interviewee who is physically located in another country participant observation in the Malinowskian sense, asks Ulf Hannerz.¹⁸ Or, one might ask, with reference to Saara Koikkalainen's contribution to this volume, whether data collection via Skype constitutes 'real' fieldwork? The question that is at stake here is whether the dominating image that we attach to the idea of 'real fieldwork' is still characterized by an idea of spending a year alone in some faraway 'exotic' place cut off from 'home'?¹⁹ In addition to the problems related to the question of how to carry out fieldwork in today's world, contemporary ethnographers often 'do not seem to know what the field is, or where it should be, if it is real or perhaps virtual, and even if there has to be one at all.'²⁰ As a consequence, many who are beginning or are in the middle of conducting fieldwork see themselves confronted like Deborah d'Amico-Samuels with the simple but at the same time complex and tricky question: 'Where is the field?'²¹

Multi-sited fieldwork

In this context, there arises the question of what sites researchers should turn to in order to make sense of the experiences of people who lead lives and conduct practices that 'cut across national borders'²² and take place in the online as well as the offline world? How should one go about studying people whose lives are marked by mobility, transnationalism or the consciousness of belonging to a diaspora; who are both here and there, and who feel at times that they are nowhere but everywhere or in between? The acknowledgment that people may maintain their cultural

15 See e.g. Lähteenmäki & Snellman 2006; Snellman 2005; Tuomi-Nikula 1989; Lindström-Best 1988.

16 See e.g. Martikainen 2004; Tiilikainen 2003; Wahlbeck 1999.

17 Falzon 2009, 6.

18 Hannerz 2006b, 28.

19 See Clifford 1997, 55.

20 Hannerz, U. 2006a, 23.

21 D'Amico-Samuels 1991, 69, quoted in Ferguson & Gupta 1997, 35.

22 Glick Schiller et al. 1992, 1.

practices and social relationships over great geographic distances has given scholars reason to reflect more closely on the form of research designs and fieldwork practices. One of the most notable proposals to emerge out of such contemplations on how to conduct ethnographic research in present times has been formulated by George Marcus in an article that outlines his ideas concerning multi-sited ethnography.²³ As a method, it aims to enable the study of the 'circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space'.²⁴ This form of ethnography is marked by mobility, and rests on the idea of 'follow[ing] people, connections, associations and relationships across space', as Marc-Anthony Falzon puts it with reference to Marcus²⁵ in an introduction to a recent volume in which the contributors reflect on multi-sited ethnography.²⁶

In the present work, many of the contributors have applied this approach in a similar way to other scholars who have conducted research on migrants.²⁷ This can be seen as a reflection of the prominence that the method of multi-sited fieldwork enjoys in the field of migration studies. José Mapril's chapter, for example, is based on fieldwork that he carried out on the one hand in the environment where the immigrants he studied had settled (Portugal), and on the other hand in the place from where they originally departed on their journey of migration, which in this case was Bangladesh. Shifting the emphasis to an investigation of how the lives of immigrants originating from one country unfold in two different settlement sites, Laura Hirvi's contribution describes the challenges she encountered during her trans-Atlantic fieldwork carried out among Sikhs from northern India who are now living in California and in Finland. Saara Koikkalainen, in turn, explores in her work the experiences of educated Finns living and working in different countries of the European Union by using the Internet to track them, thus illustrating the ways in which researchers can follow people by taking a virtual path. In other words, her work seems to suggest that the act of following does not necessarily imply the need for physical movement and that researchers may follow people to different sites using the Internet as a 'vehicle of transportation'.

Wendy Vogt explains at the beginning of her contribution how she initially set out to literally follow Central American refugees and migrants on their passages to the United States. But as she soon realized, instead of following people who were on the move, it seemed more feasible to become momentarily immobile herself in order to be able to grasp the experiences of people in transit. A similar insight seems to emerge from Lisa Wiklund's chapter, which is based on fieldwork that she carried out among young Japanese persons living and working in New York; she argues that it is

23 Marcus 1995.

24 Marcus 1995, 96.

25 Marcus 1995.

26 Falzon 2009, 1–2.

27 See e.g. Huttunen 2010; Leonard 2009; Paerregaard 2008.

perhaps preferable ‘to study cosmopolitanism without moving too much.’²⁸ Hence, both Vogt and Wiklund seem to suggest that in order to study people whose lives are marked by a high degree of mobility fieldworkers should seriously consider the option of remaining in place.

In the study of immigrants, one may choose – at least in the initial phase of fieldwork – to remain stationary in a few selected sites. The sites chosen for this purpose should be venues which by their functions attract people who are on the move in their daily lives. In the case of immigrants, as the chapters in this volume suggest, such sites could be shelters,²⁹ religious places of worship³⁰ or institutions connected with the bureaucracy involved in the process of migration.³¹ Other sites that lend themselves to the study of immigrants are festivals, parades or social gatherings like weddings and birthday parties that have been arranged by immigrants, although such occasions tend to be more fleeting in character.

The framework of this book

‘Where is the field?’ is a thought-provoking question, as this volume hopefully demonstrates, because it invites ethnographers to reflect, among other things, on their own role in shaping and finding the field that they end up studying.³² The contemplation of this question is a characteristic common to all the contributions in this book. Furthermore, all the authors discuss and reflect on their fieldwork experiences in connection with projects that focus on migrants. Thus, despite the heterogeneity of the contributors’ disciplinary backgrounds, they are all migration scholars who have based their data-gathering process on ethnographic fieldwork methods. In short, what unites the chapters in this book is the authors’ interest in studying the experiences of migrants who are in the process of moving or have moved from one country to another together with the overlap in the methods they have chosen to gather their data.

In order to provide the readers with some possible threads that they can follow when going through this volume, we decided to arrange the chapters under three broad sub-themes that reflect some of the similarities and overlaps between the various chapters. Thus, the first half of the book contains four chapters in which ethnographers reflect on the question of how to ‘reach the hard-to-reach’. For Laura Hirvi, who in the first chapter discusses her research on Sikhs immigrants and their descendants living in two different countries, the initial challenge was to gain access to people who are hard to reach in Finland because of their ‘invisibility’ in the public

28 Wiklund, this volume, 124.

29 Vogt, this volume.

30 Mapril; Meintel & Mossière; both this volume.

31 Hasselberg and Meissner; this volume.

32 See in particular Meissner & Hasselberg and Wiklund, both in this volume.

landscape stemming from the relatively small size of the group. 'Being there' in the field was thus impeded by the problem of 'getting there', and only by resorting to online methods was she able to gain access to the previously 'invisible' public and private offline world of Sikhs in Finland. Ethnographic research that is conducted online raises a number of ethical concerns, and these are highlighted in her reflections on applying the social networking service Facebook as a research tool. The definition of privacy, for example, becomes less clear when situated in the online world. Hirvi also takes up the discussion of exit in the context of fieldwork and suggests an alternative reading of what ethnographers might mean when speaking about departure from the field, namely the mental journey that researchers need to make in order to leave their work behind.

Saara Koikkalainen likewise elaborates in her contribution in Chapter Two on the usefulness of the Internet and the various tools it offers for conducting fieldwork. Her case study examines the labour market experience of educated Finns working in the European Union and scattered all over the European continent. In order to gain access to their life worlds, one option for Koikkalainen would have been to apply the method of multi-sited ethnography by literally following her informants on their journeys abroad. But gathering data in such a manner is a slow and expensive task, for which it might be hard to receive the necessary funding. Therefore, Koikkalainen decided to transfer her initial stage of data-gathering to the online world by conducting fieldwork from her office using Skype and other Internet programs. In her reflections, she concludes that the Internet is useful for ethnographers as it can be used to locate relatively small migrant groups scattered in different countries and localities.³³

Perhaps, one of the book's most intriguing studies is that of Wendy Vogt. Focusing on the journey undertaken by migrants, instead of studying them in their sending or receiving countries, Vogt succeeds in witnessing migrants in transit from very close range. Vogt is interested in examining the social world of Central American refugees and migrants in Mexico on their way to the United States, and initially she planned to follow them on their journey northwards. However, she soon realized that studying people in transit did not mean that she herself had to be in transit as well. Instead, she decided to stay in one of the established migrant shelters, which was used by vulnerable migrants, such as women and children, on their passage towards North America. This strategy had the advantage of enabling her to gain access to undocumented and vulnerable migrants, who come under the category of people who are hard-to-reach. Towards the end of her contribution, Vogt also critically reflects on her own position in the field and her struggle to maintain the 'intimate distance that is required in ethnographic research'.³⁴

The last chapter included under the sub-theme 'Reaching the Hard-to-reach' is co-authored by Fran Meissner and Inês Hasselberg. Hasselberg's

33 Koikkalainen, 62, this volume; see also Hirvi, this volume.

34 Vogt, this volume, 82.

project focuses on examining the experiences of long-term migrants who face deportation from the UK. The other project discussed in this chapter was conducted by Meissner and explores how migrants who originate from a particular geographic area and who constitute numerically small groups establish social contacts in urban areas of London and Toronto marked by super-diversity. Based on their individual fieldwork projects, both authors point out how methods, defined *a priori*, often 'have to be adjusted and creatively re-imagined'³⁵ in the light of the actual fieldwork, especially in studies that try to access a hidden population. In their chapter, Meissner and Hasselberg also offer their experience-based reflections on how access to informants and research locations can transform the notion of the field from that which a researcher sets out to study – an illustration of the fact that the malleability innate to the field is 'part and parcel of the research process'.³⁶

Chapter Five, written by Lisa Wiklund, provides a smooth transition from the first section of this book to the second, which is entitled 'Creating Communities'. In her fieldwork conducted among young Japanese adults who have moved to New York City to work in creative jobs, Wiklund wrestles, like the authors of the studies presented in the preceding four chapters, with the question of how to gain access to the group of people she would like to study. In her case, however, an even more significant challenge is posed by the question of how to keep up with people whose daily lives are marked by a high degree of mobility. Her methodological strategy for coping with these questions is to imitate the field she is studying, for example by hunting down her informants just as they as freelancers hunt for jobs; Wiklund calls this technique 'mirroring'. In addition, and with reference to the book's second sub-theme, Wiklund reflects on how far the process by means of which she constructed her field led to the creation of 'a community where there is none'.³⁷

Deirdre Meintel's and Géraldine Mossière's contribution to this book is also concerned with the issue of creating communities. In their chapter, however, it is not so much the fieldworkers who are responsible for creating communities, but rather religious affiliation is considered to be the driving force behind the process through which communities are created. As part of a larger collaborative study that seeks to document religious diversity and the significance of religion in people's everyday lives in Quebec, this chapter focuses particularly on data that have been collected by means of fieldwork conducted among religious groups that mainly attract immigrants in Montreal. The study suggests that religious groups often provide their members with an experience of fellowship and thus help to 'replace community ties fractured by migration'.³⁸ Further, religious groups provide moral communities that form an important point of reference in immigrants' post-migration lives. The challenge Meintel and Mossière see in conducting

35 Meissner & Hasselberg, this volume, 92.

36 Meissner & Hasselberg, this volume, 102.

37 Wiklund, this volume, 122.

38 Meintel & Mossière, this volume, 134.

fieldwork in religious groups is that researchers may experience a stronger need to position themselves in the field that they have entered.

Chapter Seven takes the reader closer to the lives of Bangladeshis living in Lisbon. José Mapril was initially primarily interested in exploring the ritualisation of transnational space, and gathered his data conducting multi-sited fieldwork in several different regions of Portugal as well as in Bangladesh. A second reading of his material, however, revealed to him that his informants' foodscapes were another area worth exploring in more detail. On the basis of ethnographic data, Mapril shows in his case study how food and its daily consumption can reveal a great deal about the manner in which immigrants' experience and position themselves in the life worlds they are part of. His study further demonstrates that food, and in particular the sharing of it, assists in the creation of new relationships among immigrants and helps to produce a feeling of community in religious groups.

In the first chapter located under the section title 'The Told and the Untold', Clara Sacchetti critically examines 'how one goes about gathering ethnographic data in the field'.³⁹ With reference to other researchers who have reflected on this matter from a perspective of poststructural feminist ethnography, she argues for an acknowledgement of the central role of ethnographic unknowability (or the unexplained, or fieldwork failures) for reaching a better understanding of the research object. The moment of ethnographic unknowability is illustrated in one of the chapter's vignettes, in which Sacchetti describes how in a formal interview situation an Italian woman is unable to tell about her experience of migration to Canada. But instead of looking at such moments of unknowability as failures in fieldwork that need to be overcome, Sacchetti pleads that they should be accepted in their own right as part of the field because also the untold, the unsaid and the unexplained tell the researcher something about the studied field.

If we think of this book as imitating and following an immigrant's possible life path, then it could be argued that the last contribution, authored by Sharon R. Roseman, appositely fits such an imagined time line. Her focus is on an elderly couple, of whom the husband had previously worked for years as a seasonal worker in Switzerland. Now, about ten years later and after finally settling down back in his home country, Spain, he and his wife reflect on this experience in the conversations they have with the author. On the basis of an analysis of her ethnographic data, Roseman demonstrates how 'studying migration through storytelling practices' allows her to examine the wife's and husband's 'intersubjective connections with other people as they emerge from the past, and merge into the future'.⁴⁰ In her case, the field is a told one that the practice of narrating stories helps to create.

39 Sacchetti, this volume, 190.

40 Roseman, this volume, 197.

This edited volume not only sheds light on the experiences of immigrants in different parts of the world but also offers insightful reflections on the art of carrying out fieldwork in the present day, when the task of locating the 'field' seems to present researchers with a particular challenge. Thanks to its fresh approach and its detailed descriptions of methods, this book is of interest not only to both apprentice and more experienced ethnographers working in the field of migration studies but also to scholars conducting ethnographic research in other disciplines.



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