1 Field research in political science: practices and principles

"Fieldwork continues to be the most productive and exciting part of what we do."
Philippe Schmitter (quoted in Munck and Snyder 2007, 337)

Fieldwork is "one of the more disagreeable activities that humanity has fashioned for itself."
William Shaffir and Robert A. Stebbins (1991, 1)

Field research – leaving one's home institution in order to acquire data, information, or insights that significantly inform one's research – has been a critical form of inquiry in political science since at least the 1950s. Countless books and articles produced by scholars from all subfields of the discipline, including many milestone works, have drawn on fieldwork to illuminate and answer fundamental questions about the political world. Scholars who have set out to talk to policy makers, survey citizens, and comb through archives have amassed new knowledge that has enriched our understanding of politics in the United States and around the globe.

Yet what constitutes field research in political science, how we do it, and its status in the discipline have remained curiously underspecified and under-examined. Until the early 2000s, very few political scientists had written or taught about field methodology. The term "field research," its definition, and many of the techniques political scientists employ in the field were borrowed from other disciplines, notably anthropology, sociology, history, and even economics. In fact, an extensive survey of the literature suggests that scholars from other disciplines continue to dominate intellectual output on the topic, in particular those from anthropology (e.g., Gupta and Ferguson 1997a; Amit 2000; Wolcott 2005; Bernard 2006; Borneman and Hammoudi 2009) and sociology (Burgess 1994, 1995; Emerson 2001a; Bailey 2006; Schutt 2009).[1]

[1] In the early 1990s, more anthropologists and sociologists conducted field research than scholars in any other social science discipline (Shaffir and Stebbins 1991).

Indeed, our research turned up only a handful of books on fieldwork written by political scientists (Ward 1964b; Feldman, Bell, and Berger 2003; Heimer and Thøgersen 2006; Carlson *et al.* 2010) – although several books target the social sciences generally (e.g., Robson 2002; Perecman and Curran 2006). Perhaps not surprisingly, anthropologists and sociologists writing about field research rarely address or incorporate political science and its special concerns.[2] Thus not only is the vast majority of the existing literature on fieldwork not designed *by* political scientists – it is not designed *for* them. Of course, perspectives from other fields have much to offer. Yet the topics about which political scientists conduct research and write, our theoretical frameworks, and our methodological concerns only partially overlap with those of other social scientists, rendering certain fieldwork practices and norms from other disciplines less relevant.

In addition to lacking authoritative and comprehensive accounts of and guidance on conducting field research, the discipline has also wanted for systematic assessments of its principles, processes and practices. Political scientists often summarize how they went about collecting data in the field when writing up their research (some more systematically than others), but relatively few have composed stand-alone pieces *about* the conduct or analytic value of field research. Most political science methods texts, like most methods courses, focus on conceptualization and measurement, research design, *analyzing* and deriving inferences from data, and making arguments and building theory. They dedicate far less time to addressing the challenges and imperatives entailed in *collecting* data – to conceptualizing, planning, and conducting fieldwork.

Because there has never been anything like a unified template for field research – a set of accepted patterns specifying in general terms what political scientists *should* do or *actually* do in the field – we remain unclear as a discipline about the nature and value of field research. Some political scientists retain the stylized image of a year-long trip as the hallmark of field research in the discipline. Others hold stereotypical notions that field research necessarily involves either deep ethnographic observation or qualitative interviewing of elites. Even among those who engage in field research, deep divisions exist concerning how to understand the enterprise, how to carry it out, and how to think about the information they gather. Views about

[2] Few of the anthropologists or sociologists writing on field research even acknowledge that political scientists conduct fieldwork: political scientists were rarely mentioned as belonging to the "intended audience" of these books.

the value of fieldwork likewise vary significantly, in part because we have no standards to evaluate it. For some political scientists, field research is essential – almost a rite of passage – for establishing credibility as experts on the phenomena they study. Others have overtly questioned the utility and necessity of fieldwork, challenging its potential to contribute to theory building, and suggesting that graduate students in particular are more likely to achieve professional success by mastering cutting-edge analytic techniques and applying them to existing data (e.g., Stevenson 2005). Still others locate themselves in a pragmatic middle ground, focused on acquiring the data they need to answer their questions, and open, but not committed, to gaining that information through field research.

The traditional lack of scholarly focus on and debate about fieldwork in the context of (tacit) disciplinary disagreement on its practices, principles, and utility has generated a number of problems. First, it has impeded the development of common frameworks for thinking and teaching about field research in political science. There is no vigorous discussion around or evolving disciplinary understanding of how to generate data in the field, how to assess the evidentiary value of information collected through fieldwork, or how that information can be put to work to tackle crucial analytic tasks and address significant social science questions. As a result, scholars often lack the training they need to meet the diverse challenges (financial, emotional, ethical, and analytical) that field research involves – let alone to carry out the tasks they carefully described in their prospectus or project plan (Mertus 2009, 1–7). Of course, tips and ideas about doing field research are passed from scholar to scholar in an ad hoc manner. Yet ultimately the many missteps and obstacles that fieldwork inevitably involves – as well as the inventive solutions that field researchers devise – remain buried in scholars' memories, or perhaps in the boxed-up notes in their attics. Political scientists thus often reinvent the wheel when planning and executing fieldwork. The lack of focus on field research also has negative ramifications for fieldwork's image and reputation, for our ability to assess its merits objectively, and for the quality of scholarship based on field research.

Encouraging signs of change have emerged, however. In disparate conference papers, journal symposia, and book chapters, political scientists have begun to write more about field research procedures, issues, challenges and debates (see, e.g., Lieberman, Howard, and Lynch 2004; Loaeza, Stevenson, and Moehler 2005; Carapico *et al.* 2006; Read, MacLean, and Cammett 2006; Wood 2007). Further, graduate students now have a few more opportunities to learn about field research: more departments are offering pertinent

methods courses, and other intensive training opportunities have become available.[3] The emerging literature and teaching on field research in the discipline suggest that political scientists are increasingly eager to debate the practices and value of fieldwork. Still, space constraints on articles and time constraints on courses often conspire against in-depth, nuanced treatment of field research's challenges, strategies, and analytic benefits.

The time is thus ripe for a reconsideration of, and a sustained disciplinary debate on, the conduct and value of field research in political science. As the previous discussion highlights, the literature on political science methodology has a significant gap that needs to be filled. Yet it is not *solely* that gap that necessitates a broad disciplinary discussion about field research and, we would argue, a book on field research in the discipline. An additional – and even more fundamental – motivation is the indisputable fact that without properly generated data there is no social science. Sustained, intense debate about the data generation and interpretation processes that fieldwork entails will help us to think more critically and creatively about, be more truthful and transparent about, and ultimately improve, fieldwork *methodology*. It will help us do better political science. And it will help us demonstrate the strength of field research as a mode of inquiry, as well as the contribution fieldwork makes to the generation of knowledge about politics.

We capitalize on these imperatives and trends to write the first full-length methods text on the design and execution of field research in political science.[4] We draw on multiple types of expertise and new empirical evidence gathered through an online survey, more than sixty interviews, and a review of published scholarship about, and based on, field research. Our survey of political scientists based at colleges and universities in the United States provides data on multiple parameters of fieldwork as employed in actual research projects, as well as short narratives about challenges faced and

[3] For instance: the two short courses on doing fieldwork offered annually at the APSA conference; several modules on field research offered at the IQMR held each June at Syracuse University; the summer institute on survey research techniques at the University of Michigan (under the Institute for Social Research program); the workshop on Designing, Conducting, and Analyzing Field Experiments, co-sponsored by the Institution for Social and Policy Studies at Yale University and the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Relations; the Summer Institute on Conducting Archival Research at George Washington University; and workshops sponsored by the National Science Foundation, such as one on Interpretive Methodologies in Political Science, held in August 2009 at the University of Toronto.

[4] To be clear, while other books on field research in the discipline exist, they mainly focus more narrowly on the challenges of doing fieldwork in a particular region of the world, such as China (e.g., Carlson *et al.* 2010), or on a particular technique, such as interview research (e.g., Mosley 2013a) or field experiments (e.g., Gerber and Green 2012).

strategies adopted in the field.[5] In addition, we interviewed a diverse group of political scientists who have conducted fieldwork for a wide variety of projects.[6] We interviewed scholars from every subfield in political science, ranging in rank from doctoral students to full professors with distinguished chairs, working at top-tier research universities and smaller liberal arts colleges alike. We guaranteed anonymity in these interviews in order to elicit respondents' unguarded perspectives and reflections on their experiences conducting fieldwork and lessons learned. Finally, we carefully analyzed books and articles based on fieldwork. Our frequent failure to find, in that work, clear descriptions of the data-collection techniques scholars used or justifications for their choices reinforces our call for a disciplinary dialogue on the expectations for good field research.

Finally, we draw on our own experiences as field researchers – both our mistakes and our successes. Together, the co-authors have conducted research in a wide range of field sites, from some of the wealthiest cities of the advanced industrialized world to some of the more remote villages of the Global South. In addition to their level of development and infrastructure, these field contexts vary in the extent and quality of democracy at the level of the regime, and with regard to the nature and conduct of everyday local politics. Correspondingly, we faced diverse conditions on the ground, producing contrasting challenges, obstacles, and opportunities. We have also employed diverse methodological approaches and data-collection techniques. Advising graduate students has also helped expand our knowledge of fieldwork experiences and contexts. Except for some research conducted in the United States, we have largely experienced fieldwork as non-natives, although our graduate students have recounted to us the complexities of conducting research in their hometown or "native" land.

Our goals: depicting and demystifying fieldwork and demonstrating its contributions

The book has three central goals. First, we offer an original, empirical study of the variety of field research practices used by US-based political

[5] See the Appendix for an explanation of the survey methodology.
[6] See the Appendix for detailed information on the number of scholars interviewed by gender, rank, and subfield.

scientists and how they have changed over time. Grounded in that inquiry, which clearly demonstrates that there is no single "correct" model of fieldwork, we advance an understanding of fieldwork that captures its heterogeneity. High-quality fieldwork takes a variety of forms in terms of length of stay; frequency of visits; number of field sites; and number, type, and combination of data-collection techniques employed. Furthermore, rigorous fieldwork is undertaken by scholars with different epistemological leanings, reflects a variety of methodological approaches, and occurs at different points in the research cycle and in a scholar's life and career trajectory. Our inquiry also reveals how multiple factors – for instance gender, career stage, and the ranking of a scholar's institution – shape fieldwork practices.

Second, we aim to demonstrate how field research has contributed to the production of knowledge about politics – and continues to do so, even in the face of evolving disciplinary pressures and the increasing availability of datasets from many corners of the globe. Through analyzing published political science scholarship as well as responses to our survey and interview questions, we assess the benefits and value of field research for theory development in the discipline. Moreover, we identify the multiple practices and processes through which fieldwork generates that value, leading us to reconceptualize field research as entailing both the generation *and analysis* of data, with a great deal of iteration between the two.

Given this goal, it bears noting that we operate with a specific – although encompassing – definition of data. We draw a distinction between the raw information a researcher hears, reads, senses, and collects in the field as well as the diffuse observations she makes, on the one hand, and data on the other. For us, data are materials and observations that have been processed by the researcher – considered in relation to the context from which they were drawn and assigned some analytic significance – such that they can be employed in her analysis. A researcher's impression of an interviewee's credibility (an observation) becomes a datum if and when the researcher uses it to evaluate the evidentiary value of the information that respondent provided. A researcher's sense of the power dynamics in a room (an observation) becomes a datum when it is used as an indicator of (i.e., to measure or evaluate) the authority structure in a certain context. Sometimes such materials are organized into a systematic, standardized, row/column format, but they need not be. Sometimes they are considered "causal process observations" (Collier, Brady, and Seawright 2010), but again, this is not necessary for something to be considered data. Our conceptualization of data is

agnostic to form, and appreciative of the fact that data can play many different roles in quantitative, qualitative, and interpretive analysis.[7]

Third, we hope to demystify fieldwork and provide guidance for how to do it better. We highlight the operational, intellectual, and interpersonal challenges that arise when conducting field research, and offer a wealth of practical strategies and advice – based largely on the real-life experiences of a wide range of field researchers – to help political scientists evaluate their skills, decide what kind of field research to do, and conduct fieldwork efficiently and effectively. The book should thus be helpful to a broad audience. Advanced undergraduates conducting field research during a volunteer, internship, or study-abroad program;[8] graduate students heading into the field for the first time; as well as faculty planning their first fieldwork trip, contemplating new types of field research in unfamiliar contexts, or considering how to make field research more effective and enjoyable – as well as faculty who teach methods classes or advise graduate students – should all find it useful.[9]

Given this intent, some of what we say may seem commonsensical and perhaps even obvious. Yet simply because something is mundane or commonplace does not mean it is unimportant or impossible to overlook. This is particularly true when one is operating in a context in which much is unfamiliar, juggling multiple tasks, and facing many new challenges simultaneously, as field researchers do. Moreover, time and money are precious when conducting field research, and scholars often have just one opportunity – or at most a few – to collect data in context for any particular project. Accordingly, small missteps can have enormous consequences, potentially putting months of research in jeopardy. It is also true that what may seem like an obvious point, or an obviously superior practice, is in fact only one of multiple ways of looking at or going about things. We thus err on the side of inclusivity with our advice.

Even if some of our guidance is aimed at those who are new to field research, we believe that much of what we offer will be useful to all political

[7] This definition notwithstanding, throughout the book we deploy the commonly used term "data-collection techniques" to refer to the processes scholars employ to gather information and materials in the field.

[8] Barrett and Cason (2010) highlight a large increase in undergraduate experiences abroad, growing 143 percent from 1997 to 2006/7. They also note a shift to non-European contexts.

[9] Even though much of the book's evidence emerges from interviews with US-based scholars or English-language books and articles (as discussed below), many of the arguments are relevant for scholars working at institutions around the world.

scientists, regardless of their level of experience. To be clear, we do not provide A-to-Z instruction on the use of particular data-collection techniques – although we supply (and urge readers to consult) an extensive bibliography of specialized work addressing the fundamentals of interviewing, survey research, ethnography, archival research, field experiments, and other such techniques. Rather, we seek to *contextualize* these techniques, providing high-yield pointers on their application in the field, considering how scholars' position and the context in which they are working affect their use, and suggesting how field researchers can objectively evaluate alternative techniques against analytic goals and theoretical motivations to develop an optimal field research design.

In accomplishing these goals, the book converses with several bodies of literature. First, it engages with the published literature on fieldwork in other disciplines (i.e., anthropology, sociology, history, economics, geography, and psychology) as well as the relatively new and emerging literature in political science. Second, it draws on more specialized work on particular data-collection techniques. Third, the book connects with the discussions and debates in the methodological literature in political science focused on research design, concepts, and causal mechanisms from quantitative, qualitative, and interpretivist perspectives.

Contemporary political science debates around field research

This book's three major goals relate to the explicit and implicit debates within political science concerning field research. We discuss a series of these contested issues below. We begin with debates among believers over what constitutes field research. We then turn to the debates between believers and skeptics over whether field research has value. Finally, we consider broader debates in the discipline about the possibility and desirability of shared standards for social science research, acknowledging how they might shape the practices and evaluation of field research.

Debates among believers over the definition and nature of field research

Even scholars who believe field research is valuable differ over its definition and nature. As noted at the outset, we understand field research to refer to leaving one's home institution in order to acquire data, information, or insights that significantly inform one's research. This definition diverges

from others offered in the literature in important ways.[10] Wood (2007, 123), for instance, defines field research as "research based on personal interaction with research subjects in their own setting." In the foreword to Perecman and Curran's edited volume, Featherman (2006, xviii) suggests field research involves "taking social science questions or hypothetical propositions constructed about one societal or cultural setting into another." And Shaffir and Stebbins (1991, 5) assert that "fieldwork is carried out by immersing oneself in a collective way of life for the purpose of gaining firsthand knowledge about a major facet of it."[11]

Our definition is more encompassing and more inclusive than these and others. For us, field research can be done in one's own neighborhood – it does not necessarily entail going to a foreign context. Further, we hold that field research need not involve extensive interpersonal interaction. Hence, our understanding includes such techniques as archival research and passive observation. For us, as soon as a scholar enters and engages in a context beyond her home institution in order to learn about her research topic (even if this simply entails requesting documents from an archivist or collecting maps of the region from a government agency), she has begun to do field research. Our definition does leave out certain data-collection techniques, such as online surveys, downloading survey data collected by others,[12] and phone or Skype interviews from one's office. While these practices indubitably represent useful data-gathering techniques, by our definition and understanding they do not constitute *field* research. A key aspect of our definition is that the scholar is gathering evidence *in context* – within the settings where the political decisions, events, and dynamics of interest took place or are recorded.

Finally, our definition highlights the fact that field research entails more than simply collecting data. While doing so is unquestionably a crucial part of fieldwork, scholars who conduct field research simultaneously engage in a varied set of analytic tasks. These range from informal "back of the brain" cogitating (rethinking an interviewee's responses, or comparing what one read in a newspaper with what one heard in a focus group), to organizing and processing data, to carrying out process tracing or employing other methods

[10] It bears noting that field research is not explicitly defined in most political science work that is written about it or that references it.

[11] There are other definitions. Emerson (1983) and Schatz (2009b), for instance, both offer even more ethnographic and anthropological conceptualizations. See also Wedeen (2010).

[12] Note, however, that if one were to travel to Zimbabwe to acquire the same dataset, we *would* categorize that as field research.

in an effort to evaluate their hypotheses, and everything in between. As we will argue more forcefully later, it is precisely the informed iteration between data generation and data analysis that lends field research much of its power as a mode of inquiry.

If believers in field research differ in relatively nuanced ways as to the definition of the term, they sometimes disagree to a greater degree on how to conduct field research. Of course, scholars working in urban versus rural settings, and democratic versus authoritarian regimes, or peacetime versus conflict zones (Lee-Treweek and Linkogle 2000, Sriram *et al.* 2009) may use radically different techniques in the field.[13] Yet the deeper divergences about how to approach fieldwork spring from scholars' contrasting epistemological and ontological views. More positivist quantitative and qualitative scholars on the one hand, and interpretivist researchers on the other, are often understood to ask different questions, design their research differently, engage with their field sites differently (looking for different things using different techniques), think of themselves as researchers differently (holding differing views of reflexivity, for instance), consider power relationships between themselves and those they study differently, have different views on the possibility and desirability of objectivity, and have different standards for rigor – to name just a few distinctions. One symbolic marker of this divide is seen in the discrete and uncoordinated short courses on field research these two "camps" now offer at the American Political Science Association meetings.

The multi-faceted nature of this debate – and the fact that all participants value the field research enterprise – militate against our discussing each "side's" viewpoint on each aspect of the debate. Presumably, the central dividing line has to do with the possibility of objectivity in, and of identifying truth through, field research and social science research more generally, and the utility of delving into the meanings political action has for political actors. We return to these issues below.

Debates between believers and skeptics about the value of field research

Far-reaching though the above differences of perspective are, debates between believers and skeptics go much deeper, centering on the intrinsic value of field research and scholarship produced based on data gathered

[13] Mertus (2009, 168) suggests that new communication and transportation technologies have made it easier for a wide range of researchers to travel to the heart of conflicts. She notes that during the Vietnam War only a handful of journalists went to the battlefields, while during the Balkan wars of the 1990s, journalists and academics flooded into the region.