Negotiating differences: A resource for enhancing learning and capacity building in fieldwork

The Higher Education Academy

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1 Introduction

Negotiating difference is an integral aspect of doing fieldwork. Contrary to what is popularly believed, this negotiation is as much valid in familiar as well as unfamiliar contexts.

Most Geography, Earth and Environmental Science (GEES) departments in the UK see undergraduate fieldtrips as one of the unique selling points (USPs) of their programmes. Particularly in the post-tuition increase climate a number of GEES departments across the country are revisiting their fieldtrip provisions to include more 'exotic', 'challenging' and 'interesting' places which would give a unique life-time experience to their undergraduate students who are now paying increased fees and want value for money. However, most students opting for fieldwork often find themselves in situations where negotiating the basic cultural practices of new surroundings and contexts requires more than just a recognition or even an intuitive appreciation of difference. This is not just true in the case of 'exotic' locations such as Asia or Africa, but also in familiar surroundings in the UK where appearance, accent or other subtle aspects of students' identities shape their interactions and data collection in the field.

How then do we equip students to deal with difference? How do students interpret difference in the context of fieldwork? How do we make them aware of the expected and unexpected impacts of their insertion in both new and familiar contexts? How can they reflect upon these experiences to improve their skills as ethical and responsible researchers? How can higher education in GEES help them in becoming so?

2 The purpose of this resource

This report follows on from a number of recently commissioned HEA workshops and reports around fieldwork issues. In particular, this report came about from the GEES fieldwork special interest group workshop held in Sheffield where it emerged that across the GEES disciplines the nature of differences that students have to engage in has only been partially recognised by educators. It emerged that there are specific issues around negotiating difference during fieldwork which are either not fully reflected upon by students or not engaged with in much detail during methods training and fieldwork planning.

A common understanding among educators has usually been that negotiating difference cannot be taught because of the specific and divergent nature of differences that one has to negotiate in the field and therefore students can only really learn about difference through immersion in the field. These views come from valid concerns around the formalisation and universalization (and often inadequacy) of ethical approvals in understanding difference. In an increasingly global world, however, students are able to move freely across locations even before commencing university-based field study and, therefore, experiences and understanding of differences may be formed long before entering higher education. Higher education institutions, therefore, need to be proactive in fieldwork training around negotiating all forms of difference. This is also because cultural differences are key to gaining entry and successfully conducting fieldwork in diverse settings, be they familiar contexts close to home or far away 'exotic' places.

2.1 What is difference in the field?

Difference in this resource is being broadly interpreted. During fieldwork it can range from a number of differences including class, religion, gender, ethnicity, race, generation, disability and sexual preference. These differences are based on clearly identifiable categories and, therefore, training around negotiating these differences can be broadly provided. However, there are also a number of 'personal' differences that have to do with attire, accent, bodily features, life stage, value systems and so on, that can vastly affect the fieldwork experience. The two types of differences (categorical and personal) are connected since often personal differences shape negotiations of categorical differences in fieldwork contexts. Further, there are other differences regarding 'how things work' in the research context, which might be only possible to grasp after spending time in the field. These differences are often embedded within bureaucracy, law enforcement and institutional practices that appear similar on paper yet are strikingly different in practice.

These differences are, of course, related and impact upon student data collection, yet these differences are often overlooked or discounted and worse still written out of student papers, journal articles and books. This often reflects an impression that data was collected without any interactions with local residents, that the researcher did not have to make any adjustments to the research questions or fieldwork planning and, therefore, often in false claims to 'objectivity' within the research results.

3 Negotiating difference

'Negotiating difference' has specific implications in the context of fieldwork. First, negotiating involves overcoming, challenging, or resisting a variety of encounters with categorical differences in the field. Second, negotiating involves adapting to and being open to changing oneself to 'fit' the context. Both imply a certain agency on the researchers' part but often hide the fact that negotiations

arise out of interactions between researchers and participants, and so participants may well be negotiating differences simultaneously to the researcher. Hence negotiations are as much a part of the researchers' entry and data collection in the field, as they are about the participants' and gatekeepers' facilitation of the fieldwork. *In this report therefore negotiation is seen as overcoming, challenging, resisting and adjusting to differences on the part of both researcher and researched.*

This report has a specific purpose. It is meant as a resource that lecturers and students can access before, during and after their fieldwork. It is expected to be used largely as a methods development and capacity building guide that will allow students embarking on short fieldtrips or longer fieldwork to consider issues and challenges that will prepare them for negotiating a range of differences in the field. This report, therefore, is not a 'how to' guide for fieldwork, rather a starting point for further conversations and debates around the diversity of differences and their negotiations in the field for both human and physical geographers.

3.1 The physical/human divide

There is an implicit understanding that it is only human geographers who negotiate differences during fieldwork. After all, their work involves engaging with human participants, often those who come from very different contexts and cultural backgrounds from them. It is no surprise, therefore, that there is a rich and growing literature and debate in the social sciences (which include human geography, sociology and anthropology) around difference, identity and ethics that researchers encounter and negotiate during fieldwork. While academics often reflect about these negotiations in journals and books, less debated are the differences which undergraduate students encounter on their fieldtrips (often for the first time) and resultant learning outcomes. These negotiations are evident in student reflective diaries, usually an integral aspect of their assessment on fieldtrips. These diaries illustrate a variety of emotional and affective response, from shock to disgust, from excitement to disillusionment, from empathy to alienation, and from exoticization to banalisation. Undergraduate students usually never expect to experience this range of emotions and coping with them often proves difficult for some. This is true not just when students encounter poverty in the 'Global South' but also when students encounter homeless people or forced labour in the UK.

In contrast, those in physical geography, earth and environmental sciences are seen to be relatively 'protected' from human contact. The common belief is that since those working in earth and environmental sciences are interested in physical environments – geological sections, sediments, peat bogs, river basins, marine life, and so on, they do not necessarily have to make the same kind of cultural negotiations as their human geography counterparts. This is at least partially incorrect. While physical geographers do not always deal with human participants, they nevertheless conduct their research within social, cultural and sometimes highly politicised fields. The work of collecting soil or rock samples and carrying out surveys or experiments would not be possible without the help of local research assistants, partners or officials who enable the smooth (or otherwise!) transition from familiar to unfamiliar ways of working in the field. Physical geographers too have to work in contexts outside the security of the laboratory environment where, in order to collect data, they are compelled to interact with local residents and gain knowledge of the field before starting their work.

They might also have to negotiate differences of another kind such as:

- weather irregularities;
- low technology;
- poor quality equipment;
- prohibitions over collecting mineral samples;
- cultural and spiritual values inhibiting collection of data from forests or water bodies;
- accessibility to remote areas.

The physical/human split therefore appears more blurred and ambiguous once we consider negotiations of differences in this light. So this report follows the notion that the physical/human divide is constructed and that both human geographers and earth scientists, environmental scientists and physical geographers have to negotiate differences on their own terms which are specific to the kind of data collection and research contexts they are working in. This report explicitly discusses negotiations across these two streams within GEES.

4 Purpose of fieldwork

Fieldwork is largely understood as a set of activities performed in situ to collect data to answer a set of research questions. It therefore necessarily involves travel to nearby or remote, unfamiliar or familiar, locations where the research questions are embedded. Consequently it involves encountering people and landscapes that might be considered 'different' from the researcher in several ways. As outlined earlier, these differences might be recognisable variations in language, economic profile, gender, religious affiliation or sexual orientation between researcher and those in the fieldwork locations. However, they can also be more subtle personal variations in accent, bodily attire and demeanour, life-stage, values and so on. Further, there are other differences regarding political, social and cultural contexts of bureaucracy and institutions in the field. Fieldwork training, therefore, should

ideally include not just clearly identifiable categorical differences, or more subtle personal differences, but also reflection on what these differences mean and how they affect fieldwork.

1.1.1.1 Types of fieldwork

Fieldwork can involve a range of activities across geography, earth and environmental sciences:
- participant observation;
- interviews;
- surveys and questionnaires;
- photo and video documentation and ethnographic filming;
- participatory methodologies using diaries, mapping, photography and videos;
- collection of physical samples;
- surveys and field experiments;
- digitisation and mapping.

In training the next generation of GEES researchers we need to ask the question – what is fieldwork for? Does fieldwork solely exist for the purposes of data collection or is it also meant to be an enriching and learning experience for the researcher? Is the researcher expected to give anything back to the communities where they do research and, if so, should this be material or in kind? Finally, should the researcher reflect upon the collection of data as a co-creation of knowledge between researcher and participant in fieldwork contexts?

5 Methods of collecting responses

For the purposes of writing this report, a call for reflections on negotiations of difference was circulated to colleagues in UK and international universities and posted on a number of email distribution lists and via social media. Fourteen participants (including undergraduate, PhD students, post-docs, lecturers, senior lecturers and professors) responded with detailed answers, which form the basis of this report. In addition, a focus group within the Citizenship and Belonging research cluster in the School of Geography, University of Leeds, was carried out. This focus group noted a number of issues that should be highlighted and debated in the UK academic context. This report is a combination of these responses and focus group discussions.

6 Learning from difference (key observations from responses)

One of the striking features of responses was the emotional and affective nature of knowledge construction that goes on during fieldwork. Fieldwork is not just about inserting oneself in the field, it is also about learning from the number of encounters and interactions one has in the field. Sometimes this learning can be ridden with doubts and misgivings around the impact this has on communities and on one's wellbeing.

6.1 Culture of volunteering

One of the concerns raised by respondents was not the lack of involvement, rather the superficial nature of involvement students have with fieldwork contexts. This is seen to be facilitated by what is now known as a '*culture of volunteering*' shaped by taking gap years in school, undertaking study abroad at university, undertaking short fieldtrips to far-flung locations and a number of other ways of 'experiencing' other cultures that are becoming more and more diversified and popular among students. This was seen by respondents as 'casual' engagement with local landscapes and communities but engagement which students use to enhance their CVs, increase employability skills and apply to top universities.

In this context, respondents were concerned that 'negotiation of difference' has become simply another box that is ticked within the university ranking system and job market searches, and not necessarily as a way to understand one's place in society or indeed to become more sensitive and empathetic to 'others'. As one respondent noted 'it takes real courage to make that leap alone – to do it without expecting to be lauded for it, or to receive a grade for it, for that matter.'

Making that leap forward remains a challenge currently in the climate of recession and tuition fee increases where students are increasingly competing to find employment and make their CVs marketable. To engage in understanding and negotiating difference for purposes beyond marks and skills enhancement is something that will need to be debated with students from very early on. One of the ways that negotiating difference could be discussed with students is to highlight the deeper life-changing experiences of reflecting upon difference as a way of being and existing in the world, as a way of contributing to society per se, in ways that go far beyond the material and tangible benefits of a university degree. As one respondent noted: "To understand and negotiate difference not just as a way to increase the university's competitiveness or students' employability but to actually understand what it means to

be different and therefore how this can contribute to deeper understanding of issues in the fieldwork context is probably the most challenging aspect of fieldwork."

1.1.1.2 Response One

The clinic that I worked in and then went on to do research on was a favourite site of students to come and 'do research'. For the six years I worked there before I attended graduate school, we (the staff) made fun of the researchers. The well meaningness of their projects, their intense desire to 'do good', their far-fetched claims, their 'finding' of themselves in poor black children was laughable – only because it was so common we couldn't be angry any more. I know that sounds harsh, but we were appalled by the lack of sensitivity of so many of the young, bright-eyed, bushy-tailed research students that came traipsing in and out of the clinic. In the end, most of them got their research project completed, got their MA or PhD, and then moved on, never to be seen or heard from again. (PhD student, Human Geography, US)

6.1.1 Summary

- Volunteering, gap years or study abroad does not necessarily bring about understanding of difference.
- It is not just about encountering difference, rather the nature of interactions with difference that shape our understanding of the wider connections between difference and structural conditions of poverty, crime, development and so on.
- Interactions with fieldwork contexts do not 'end' at the completion of the project, but deeper engagement with difference is only possible with continued and sustained engagement with fieldwork contexts before, during and after fieldwork has been completed.

6.2 Pilot studies and familiarisation

Where does this leave the future of volunteering? Is casual engagement with difference risky in that it might actually lead to the reinforcement of stereotypes? Does this mean we should not encourage students to volunteer or take study abroad and fieldtrips? Do short visits to other locations/sites have any contribution to make in learning to negotiate difference?

What we should argue for here is not that volunteering and all other forms of short-term interactions within fieldwork contexts should be discontinued; rather they must become part of a bigger picture of continued engagement through potential in-depth research projects. This means that volunteering or student fieldtrips should not be seen as an end in, and of, themselves, rather they should be seen as providing initial insights into communities or landscapes with which researchers might have more long-term productive engagements in the future. These short engagements, therefore, should be constructed as '*familiarisation'* with difference.

Understanding and negotiating difference in fieldwork contexts involves a crucial element of *familiarisation*. This familiarisation can be produced through volunteering, gap years, and study abroad trips, but also crucially made possible through *pilot studies*. Respondents noted that pilot studies formed a key element of reflections of successful negotiations of difference. They provided ways to understand and situate the research contexts within wider processes of inclusion and exclusion.

One of the main weaknesses of volunteering is the inability of students to go beyond difference as a category of identification to delve really deeply into how negotiations with difference shape the research story. As one respondent noted: "Helping students to recognize difference without them settling into making that recognition the crux of their learning takes a lot of work and patience."

This then is both a goal and a real challenge. How do we train students to conduct fieldwork in a way that recognizes and sensitizes oneself to difference without necessarily making that recognition an end in itself? How do we equip students to reflect upon difference without making this reflection a marker of 'success' in fieldwork?

Respondents (both PhD students and professors) noted that they too had long-term experiences of working in particular contexts and communities. Having had this long-term familiarisation, they understood some of the challenges they would have to face and how they would then deal with them. Such familiarity helps in maintaining composure and remaining calm during stressful times. Another respondent suggested making use of small-scale funding to do pilot studies in order to devise the research questions before putting in a research grant.

Another crucial factor that emerged from the responses was the need for familiarisation through language. Language provides a window to cultural values and practices of particular communities and geographical regions. Learning the language is a very common tactic employed in some of the cognate disciplines to human geography – anthropology and sociology. This was recognized by respondents at all levels of learning and in both human and physical geography. As an undergraduate student in physical geography noted: "Language skills are key to a successful field experience."

Language skill is not just a crucial element of negotiating difference for human geographers but, as a number of respondents highlighted, physical geographers and earth and environmental scientists also have to continually grapple with local cultural encounters which could have been smoothed through language competence. Natural environmental scientists often work in teams and in places that are not heavily populated. They also deal with products, materials and natural resources that entail human

interactions with bureaucracy, industries and local companies. Learning culture-specific language codes can mean less frustrations and delays around sample collections, field tests and so on.

1.1.1.3 Response Two

I think that students should have reflected on these issues extensively before conducting fieldwork, and should have some 'low stakes' experience of dealing with the issues prior to embarking on something of the scope of a PhD. Not all people are appropriate for all kinds of fieldwork, and (potential) researchers need to give careful thought to these issues at the stage of research design. Of course there are inevitably new and unexpected experiences and encounters to negotiate, but I think that there should be some demonstrable success with complex fieldwork encounters with difference before starting fieldwork on a sensitive, charged topic. (Senior lecturer in Human Geography, UK)

1.1.1.4 Response Three

The main cultural challenges encountered during these trips were simply due to a lack of familiarity and understanding of how business was conducted in the countries in question. In India, I needed to have chemicals and gases delivered to particular places, and in Oman we needed to get frozen samples flown home packed in dry ice. In both cases it was difficult to understand the thoughts of the people we were dealing with, and therefore we didn't really have a good idea of what to do to make things happen (more smoothly or, indeed, at all). In India the problem was partly about me and the local chemical suppliers understanding each other on the telephone, despite the fact we were both speaking the same language. (Lecturer in Physical Geography, UK)

6.2.1 Summary

6.2.1.1 Benefits of familiarisation

- Making personal and professional contacts prior to the project.
- Finding one's 'feet' in unfamiliar surroundings.
- Getting used to bureaucratic and institutional cultures of working.
- Getting used to weather.
- Remaining calm in stressful conditions.
- Understanding difference not just as a mere marker but as implicated within wider issues of structural violence.

6.2.1.2 Routes to familiarisation

- Spend time volunteering/working//living in similar contexts.
- Use some funding to conduct pilot studies to devise initial research questions.
- In the case of sensitive/charged topics - find different ways of negotiating difference through short fieldwork encounters before starting longer research.
- Learn to speak the local language.
- Carefully think of research design and how familiarisation with difference can help within the research framework.
- Consider how your own personal traits and value/belief systems might make you appropriate or inappropriate for the study.

6.3 Flexibility and adaptability

One of the key observations from the responses was that flexibility lies at the heart of fieldwork. While familiarization allows researchers to understand what to expect, flexibility is really the only way to deal with unexpected events and encounters which can be stressful, counterproductive or result in long delays to the fieldwork.

1.1.1.5 Response Four

Things don't always go to plan and you have to be able to adapt and work with this – but with your and your participants' safety a priority at all times. (PhD student in Physical Geography, UK)

Flexibility and familiarity emerged as the key themes of negotiating and learning from encounters with differences. While familiarity serves to anticipate encounters, flexibility becomes central in negotiating them.

6.3.1 Summary

Flexibility might entail among other things, openness to:

- different clothing styles and ways of dressing in order to 'fit in';
- different working styles (eg from formal to informal) in order to respond to cultures of working in local contexts;
- different forms of encounter with locals (folding hands to greet rather than shaking hands);
- long waits for clearances and bureaucracies to materialize;
- different levels of hygiene, sanitation, living and working conditions;
- different modes of transport and the extra delays or stresses that might come with it;
- dealing with encounters that one might consider racist, sexist, homophobic and other forms of exclusionary practices.

- dealing with different smells, tastes, sights and sounds.

6.4 Fieldwork learning and ethics

Overall, the respondents noted that university ethical review boards have quite comprehensive guidelines that force students and staff to reflect upon different issues before commencing fieldwork. These boards ask researchers to outline the type of participants, what they will be asked to do, how informed consent will be received, what information they would be given about the research, how participants will be identified, approached and recruited, and how their anonymity and confidentiality will be safeguarded. Alongside this, researchers also have to conduct a risk assessment that identifies and addresses anticipated issues of emotional or material harm to the researcher and participants.

What seems evident though is that the ethical review procedures are only set in place if the researcher identifies their fieldtrip to be dealing with 'human participants' in any way or if they will be undertaking research in which environmental impacts are expected. This has two consequences – first that researchers in physical geography do not necessarily need to go through ethical reviews even though they might have a number of encounters with local residents where difference of some form or the other might have to be negotiated. Although some departments provide detailed 'codes of practice for fieldwork', this also means that students in natural sciences are effectively expected to conduct themselves as 'good citizens' wherever they go. They will have lower stakes in reflecting upon their ethical conduct during fieldtrips and expeditions, unless it impacts on the data collection. But what if a student's or staff's conduct as a good citizen in their home context is not perceived as such in the fieldwork context?

Second it means that even amongst human geographers, those on short fieldtrips or study abroad experiences will not necessarily have to go through ethical approval since they might not actually come in direct contact with local human participants for data collection. This will indeed be true for BA Geography fieldtrips where students are not always expected to conduct interviews (particularly if these fieldtrips are in locations where language presents a barrier). While risk assessment addresses some ethical concerns, it is primarily intended to address risks presented to the researcher. Where does that leave space for reflecting upon, and learning from, encounters with difference?

Respondents agreed that while ethical review and risk assessment procedures were helpful they did not necessarily deal with the realities of negotiating differences on the ground. Instead they were seen more as legal and formal procedures to 'cover' university liabilities. As one PhD student put it: "I didn't find our ethics process nor our risk assessment process useful in any form." However, it is challenging if not impossible for ethical reviews to address the diversity of differences and their associated ethics that researchers encounter during fieldwork. Negotiating differences in fieldwork, therefore, needs to be dealt with via different support systems and networks and not necessarily through the formalistic and bureaucratic procedures of liability and risk as is currently undertaken.

1.1.1.6 Response Five

While I find the whole process (ethical review) extremely frustrating, I do very well understand its importance. Even so, it is not the be-all, end-all. In fact, I worry, sometimes that it creates the rubric within which to be insensitive. Alain Badiou cautions about this issue: that once you have a set of rules and regulations through which to act, you lose the very human essence of critically and compassionately thinking through individual and personal actions. I do not think the further bureaucratization is the answer. I do think, however, that there is a need in geography for a more pointed discussion of ethics – not in relation to ethical review, but in crafting our own personal ethics as geographers. (PhD student, US)

1.1.1.7 Response Six

I do think these are often very rigid though and a degree of flexibility - common sense even - has to be applied when in the field. (PhD student, UK)

6.4.1 Summary

Ethical considerations in the field should:

- be differentiated and localised rather than universal;
- use 'common sense' in that ethical judgements can be built through extended periods of familiarisation;
- prioritise a humanistic approach of critically and compassionately thinking about personal actions and their impacts;
- be engaged in crafting personal ethics and conscience over a period of time;
- involve returning to the field after research has been completed to discuss findings with local participants and use their feedback to enrich the study.

6.5 Negotiating power and difference in the field

Negotiating power and differences between researcher and participants is one of the most debated topics in academic papers in social sciences. It is widely accepted that when inserted in the field, researchers experience a number of encounters through which their differences from participants become pronounced or accepted. Some of these differences relate categories of identification such as gender, age, race, ethnicity, language, religion, sexuality, disability, nationality and so on. These differences can be named and

debated in terms of how much and in what ways they impact on the collection of data, ie during surveys, interviews, participant observation or any form of qualitative or quantitative research. In general it is also widely accepted that research of any kind in the social sciences entails 'co-construction' of knowledge between researcher and participant. This knowledge is also 'situated', in that it is produced 'in situ' from a local set of contexts and is highly specific to researcher-participant relationships in time and space. Thus, unlike earth and environmental sciences, human geography is seen as closely aligned to the social sciences, where negotiating difference in the field is an integral aspect of the research story that emerges afterwards.

However, while differences according to identity categories are somewhat easier to identify there are more subtle differences such as accents, attire, demeanour, skin colour, physique and so on. These markers, that are usually prescribed on the body of researchers and participants, produce powerful ideas about who belongs and who does not within fieldwork contexts. These markers also determine who is welcomed and who might face obstacles in completing their fieldwork. Further, these differences are closely associated with more structural categories, ie skin colour or accent might give indications of race, language, nationality, etc. Negotiating or adapting to these differences in ethical ways takes greater observational skills and reflexivity from the part of the researcher.

The range of differences arising from, but not limited to, direct and subtle markers on the body drive debates on the politics of 'insider/outsider' knowledge in social sciences. Students often mistakenly assume that if they can connect to participants through some identity affiliation it will give greater authenticity to their relationship, or if they come from communities they research this might jeopardise the 'objectivity' of their research. Such discussions of 'authenticity' of knowledge generated during fieldwork and its 'objectivity' have been subjects of long-term debates. The fact remains that even if researchers connect to participants through one or other identity markers (such as age, gender or religion, for example), there will be other identity affiliations that will remain different. Thus, despite the quest for 'insider' knowledge and 'objectivity', differences between researcher and participant can never be eliminated and should not be the purpose of research. Instead, difference should be used by the researcher to understand how power works in the field and how this power impacts on the research knowledge. Difference then becomes the starting point of a long-term relationship negotiated between researcher and participants.

The final point in this issue is around the often mistaken assumption of a hierarchical relationship of power between researcher and participant. Given the popularity of fieldtrips to exotic locations and far-flung destinations, students often received first exposure to these contexts though interactions with vulnerable communities. Procedures for sensitivity to vulnerable groups are covered in the bureaucracy of ethical review procedures. However, these procedures mask the subversive nature of power held by these communities. In an increasing culture of global developmentality, participants in these contexts are often some of the most researched communities in the world. One such example is Dharavi, which has been brought onto the world stage through the movie Slumdog Millionaire, slum tours and journalist novels (such as *Shantaram* and *Beyond the Beautiful Forevers*) which valorise the resilience of its communities amid extreme adversity. Students approach these communities assuming residents would be grateful to talk to others in order to make their voices heard. They are surprised to see that participants are already over-researched, suffer from research fatigue and refuse to help another student who would not be able to make any real difference to their lives.

Human geography

1.1.1.8 Response seven

The negotiation was not so much in my case over 'difference' (ie the fact that I am British, white, female was not the sticking point regarding access and dynamics of research), as the power relations between researcher and researched, which is a broader question than the singular aspect of 'personal' difference. (Professor in Human Geography, UK)

1.1.1.9 Response eight

Participants didn't consider themselves necessarily resourceless; as one said to me: "It is my decision to be interviewed." (PhD student in Human Geography, UK)

1.1.1.10 Response nine

I had to go out and buy my first pair of blue jeans to 'fit in' – I was kindly chided for not 'dressing down enough' in order to make the interviewees feel comfortable. I was wearing what I thought was a rather ratty pair of pants when I received this bit of advice. Another issue that came up was race. My race is rather ambiguous to most people – I get read variously as Persian, South Asian, etc, yet I am Latina. Most of the people I was interviewing were black, and I had some pushback from people who were uncomfortable with my being in community spaces. (PhD student, US)

1.1.1.11 Response ten

Respondents often had questions for me about my own religious commitments. Sometimes this seemed to be a result of people wanting to know how to position me before sharing too much about themselves: was I likely to be sympathetic, hostile, indifferent? For those, it seemed more like a simple matter of interpersonal curiosity: they had shared a considerable amount about themselves, and wanted to know more about me as a person (Senior lecturer, UK)

1.1.1.12 Response 11

Negotiating difference must be much, much more than a project of the researcher. It should be a humbling experience, not simply an academically gratifying one. It requires honesty and, above all, no pity. It requires being able to let go of preconceived notions about 'correct' action or responses. It requires being open to the difference, not just to naming it. And that is something that takes years of practice – it's not something that can simply be gleaned from one or two research projects. (PhD student, US)

It might seem that these points are valid only for human geography, but earth and environmental science disciplines too remain bound by local power struggles, unwritten codes of conduct and suspicion around their activities. Given the nature of their work around geological surveying, rock sampling, and so on, they are also often mistaken as official representatives of the government and face different kinds of obstacles to the completion of their work.

Physical geography

1.1.1.13 Response 11

Conducting natural sciences fieldwork is highly charged in contexts where issues of religion and sexual orientation are politicised. (Senior lecturer, UK)

1.1.1.14 Response 12

Talking about these issues is important – particularly having experienced female academics able to discuss issues of sexuality in different cultures would be very helpful (there are too many of us men!). (Senior lecturer, UK)

1.1.1.15 Response 13

I think researchers in the natural sciences should also consider all these points [difference] - research is rarely done in a social vacuum and how natural scientists behave in the field and whether they disseminate results to participants and how they do this affects not only the communities they work in but also researchers following on behind. (PhD student, UK)

1.1.1.16 Response 14

We often become so driven by our own research that we don't realise what it looks like to local people. We are completely unaware that people may worry that we are prospecting for oil or minerals, or damaging their national security by collecting information of their coastline, as these things are so very far from our actual intentions. It might be worth having a wider awareness of what people think of us, so that we can clear up those worries if they become problematic. (Female lecturer, UK)

1.1.1.17 Response 15

Natural scientists need to be introduced to the idea of 'positionality' – as something which doesn't just affect social science work but the conducting of all fieldwork. There is so much written about this, as critical pieces and as methodology texts, that should be used with natural scientists as part of their methodological training. (PhD student, UK)

6.5.1 Summary

Guidelines on negotiating difference:

- do not assume that participants are voiceless, powerless victims who you must 'save' through research;
- difference *per se* is not counterproductive for fieldwork, while the silencing of difference can be;
- how differences between researchers and participants are negotiated depends largely on the reflexivity and sensitivity of the researcher, their relationships with gatekeepers and with local communities;
- reflect on what your research may look like to local people and negotiate your conduct in the field accordingly;
- reflect on what you will leave behind in the community and for future researchers who come after you;
- it is only fair that having answered your questions, participants are curious about you as researcher, but you have to negotiate the boundaries between friendships and friendliness through the specifics of your relations with them.

6.6 Support during fieldwork

It is a huge challenge for students, particularly those starting long-term research for the first time, to react appropriately and ethically to difference in the field at all times. Negotiating difference is a continuous process of learning and cannot be confined to briefing and de-briefing sessions. Rather, on-going support during fieldwork can enhance both the collection of data and the fieldwork experience of researchers. Yet too often universities tend to forget about students when they are in the field and students get so involved in the field that they just get by without asking for help.

Support networks are crucial during fieldwork for a number of reasons. First, they ensure the general wellbeing of researchers and students who spend time in the field, often listening to stories which can often be distressing or disturbing. Having a support network of friends and family ensures that researchers realise they are not alone and that they have others to rely upon emotionally. Second, the support network ensures that students continue to receive expert advice from their supervisors or ethics committees regarding challenges faced during fieldwork. Thus different types of support networks ensure the overall wellbeing of researchers as well as ethical sensitivity in the research. Finally, support networks of all kinds are crucial to researchers for finding their feet in the fieldwork context, as well as adjusting back to life in the UK on return.

One of the most crucial aspects of support was seen in ways that formal or informal partnering could be established with local universities, organisations, NGOs or charities, who would support and give advice to students in return sometimes for volunteering in their activities. Indeed for more successful negotiations, these initial volunteering activities resulted in more long-term PhD research through local partner organisations. Also seen as important was the support received from local research assistants and gatekeepers in negotiating and unpacking cultural codes and meanings and facilitating smoother fieldwork experience for both researchers and participants. Students do have to keep in mind though that using the local research assistants as the final authority can also be challenging in cases when local power relations are highly politicised and charged, and association with gatekeepers or organisations can restrict access to particular groups of participants. However, overall the benefits of local partners could not be discounted in terms of the value and richness they can bring into the research project, both in terms of negotiating local difference as well as contributing to the wider issues of reflecting and learning from fieldwork experiences.

1.1.1.18 Response 12

I would have found the fieldwork more challenging if I had not been a part of a team, where there was lots of camaraderie and good will to counteract some of the negativity with which we were routinely confronted. (Senior lecturer, UK)

1.1.1.19 Response 13

Just as hard is returning to the UK after a long period abroad – also needs to be covered in discussions. (Senior lecturer, UK)

6.6.1 Summary

- Sustain a strong group of family, friend and collegial support networks during fieldwork, which can empathise, give advice and provide a good listening ear.
- Do not hesitate to contact ethics committee or supervisor while facing challenges or difficulties in the field.
- Partner with local universities, think-tanks, NGOs and charity organisations, and/or recruit local research assistants in order to receive support and advice during fieldwork.

6.7 Training received

Most respondents noted that the training they received in their home institutions was inadequate for the challenges and diversities of difference they encountered in the fieldwork. In most cases fieldwork was discussed around methodological issues. Ethics, however, formed a token aspect of that. Students and researchers were made aware of the university ethical procedures and asked to follow these during fieldwork. However, as highlighted already, ethical guidelines were very general and did not cater for a diversity of situations when respondents noted they had to make do with their knowledge and experience gleaned from their familiarisation with the context and adaptability and resilience developed over time in the field. Most respondents also suggested that understanding and negotiating difference to contribute to deeper learning required that this should be a learning outcome for the methods modules.

In cases where more detailed training on negotiating difference was given, this related largely to equality and diversity issues particularly with respect to gender, religion and disability of students. This was very relevant where consideration had to be taken of religious practices of students and participants which prohibited travel, work or mobility on certain days. This was also relevant for human or physical geographers where physical disability of students proved to be a challenge on fieldtrips in hard to reach areas.

1.1.1.20 Response 12

Except for one seminar in which we discussed these issues, I have experienced very little in-depth discussion about this as part of the training that I have received. (PhD student, US)

1.1.1.21 Response 13

What is needed is a better discussion of these important issues in methodological training related to fieldwork. Most of our Masters programmes in Geography here don't do methodological training, only their selected taught courses and then are expected to go off and conduct fieldwork/do research with no prior training – it's crazy! (PhD student, UK)

1.1.1.22 Response 13

I think this should be a learning outcome in an undergraduate course or project. Negotiating difference will always be a learning outcome, even if it is not stated as such. And I worry that making it a codified outcome will stunt the possibility of real learning. (PhD student, US)

I think there must be reflection especially in dissertation or in specific papers. There is a lack of valorisation of this issue, as a result it seems that all research process is lineal and differences don't exist or matter. (Professor, Mexico)

6.7.1 Summary

- Fieldwork training received by GEES students from undergraduate to PhD levels is often too broad and generic to effectively cover aspects of difference.
- Negotiating difference could become part of learning outcomes in methods modules.
- Usually relates to student's equality and diversity in order to be included in fieldtrips.
- Most universities have a code of conduct to deal with potential 'harm' to participants.
- The research process is not linear and therefore differences should form part of the discussion of fieldwork outcomes.
- Reflexivity regarding positionality is the key to methodology and fieldwork training.

7 Case study examples on negotiating difference

Destination and level	Fieldwork methods	Challenges encountered	How was difference negotiated?
Human geography			
Zambia (2010-11) PhD student, UK.	Life-mapping with young people aged between 14-30 years with a care-giving responsibility for sick and disabled parents.	White, educated, western female working in very poor and conservative rural areas. Attracting unwanted male attention as a result. Misunderstandings of role (medical doctor instead of PhD). Physical accessibility to rural areas. Dealing with no-shows and hence abortive journeys.	Undertaking a pilot research before commencing. Regulating appearance and clothing appropriate to context. Being direct about role and position. Offer remuneration to participants. Remaining calm and patient.
Istanbul, Turkey (2005-06) PhD student, UK.	Interviews. Participant observation of life inside gated communities. Photo-documentation.	Changing gatekeepers. Physical access to gated communities. Becoming judgemental about residents' values and lifestyles. Time constraints and lack of funding.	Listened to the advice of gatekeepers and interviewees. Adopt a critical view in order to learn about everyday lives and identity construction.
US and UK (2008-2010) Senior lecturer, UK.	Interviews with individuals and organisations about their views on the sexuality debates in the Anglican Communion. Participant observation in the Lambeth conference for Anglican Bishops in UK and General Convention of the Episcopal Church in US.	(Un)Familiarity with religious practices of the Church (when to stand, kneel or sing). Religious affiliation or lack thereof.;	General approach as an interviewer is to appear both interested and mildly encouraging. Approach things with an ethnographic detachment.
Nepal (eight months 2007-08) PhD student, UK.	Semi-structured questionnaires and ambulatory interviews, household surveys, focus groups, key informant interviews.	Positionality of researcher and research assistant that led to mistaken expectations from local communities. Ethical choices faced in terms of what to 'give back'. Attire associated with particular gatekeepers/informants.	Seeking advice on cultural and technical issues from local research partner who had the technical forestry training and was Nepali. Decisions on what kinds of local clothes to wear in order to associate with specific gatekeepers.
Mexico (2009-10) Academic, Mexico.	In-depth interviews and non-participant observation among women in different rural communities who worked in ecotourism and adventure tourism.	Power relationships – mainly gender, age and life cycle, as well as ethnic differences. Also surname was same as a rich family in Mexico which led to expectations of opportunities from participants.	By being sincere and respectful. However as a middle-class single woman researcher could not avoid identifying more with urban women rather than rural single women.
East London (2002-03) PhD student, US.	Semi-structured interviews with social housing tenants – mainly Bangladeshi, Somali and white.	Challenges of class, religion and race. Mostly welcomed by Bangladeshi participants on account of being Bengali. More challenging with white participants who often expressed derogatory and racist comments towards Asian social housing tenants.	Being a good listener and being respectful of all opinions, even those which one did not agree with.
Ecuador (2006-2011) Professor, UK.	Semi-structured interviews with a diverse group of stakeholders. Participant observation in meetings. Collecting policy documents.	Gaining trust and establishing a collaborative project with indigenous populations who are increasingly reluctant to participate in research which they feel has	Long-standing contacts and collaborations with indigenous organisations facilitated fieldwork. Taking local gatekeepers'

		been 'taken away' and never has any benefits for them.	concerns seriously, working collaboratively and also ensuring that there was feedback and contributions to their agendas and concerns.
London and Chennai (2012-13) PhD student, UK.	Combination of video-ethnographic techniques and interviews to examine traveller's activities both within the car during their journeys, as well as exploring behaviour around the journey itself.	Making contact and recruiting participants, sustaining and building trust, being less/more formal. Learning cultural jargons.	Finding common ground with participant families, making more effort to 'blend in'.
Seattle, USA (2009-10) PhD student, US.	Interviewing health care providers, managers, and outreach workers of a small children's clinic in a low-income neighbourhood. Interviewing managers, care givers, and recipients of care for three health and human service programmes for recidivist drug and alcohol users and addicts.	Not able to dress down enough to 'fit in'. Negotiating the best way to engage with a closed group of substance abusers without being too much of an observer. Discomfort with racial identity.	Volunteering to become a more regular part of the group, had conversations about topics that were not part of the interview process, shared own-life experiences with participants.
Leeds, UK (2012-13) UG level 3, UK.	One-hour interviews with transnational market traders (on their stalls) at Kirkgate Market. Plus an additional interview with a member of Leeds City Council. Journal observations (usually 30-minutes to one-hour long).	Assumptions of class: how I dressed and how I spoke; interviewees assumed I was of a much higher class and working for Leeds City Council. Language barriers; sensitive issues meant interviewees were sometimes afraid to divulge too much information about themselves.	Dress as casually/unofficially as possible to try to prevent assumptions about position. Listen as intently as possible (hesitant to suggest words but in some cases this was necessary). Tried to be as approachable/friendly as possible. Tried to show interviewees I was very accepting and very interested in what they had to say.
Earth and Environmental Sciences			
Spain, Portugal and Cyprus (March-April 2013) UG level 3, UK.	Regional geology excursions, field mapping, resource estimation, geotechnical survey and environmental impact of mining.	Language is the main obstacle in Spain/Portugal for negotiating access, accommodation, and communicating the purpose of the trip. Catholic or Orthodox Easter is usually considered as an additional cultural asset during the field trips, but may add another day and can cause significant cost issues.	Make best use of language skills among students and staff. Ensure to clearly communicate a transparent programme at the start of the field course.
Cumbria, UK (five months) PhD student, UK.	GIS and mixed-methods GIS, focus group events (knowledge-exchange workshop), soil sampling, vegetation surveying.	Building trust with farmers and other stakeholders. Language barriers. Research fatigue from some participants. Recruitment of participants. Understanding the context. Understanding farming calendar.	Taking time. Keeping research participant group small. Being inter-disciplinary and open minded. Reading farmer blogs and opinions from NFU. Consulting other agricultural expert practitioners. Listening. Keeping my research plan open enough. Flexibility.

			Respect. Remembering to be open minded about the type of data I collect - ie trying to forget what I expect to hear.
Ghana, Peru, Brazil etc (2011-12) Senior lecturer, UK.	Measurement and identification of tropical trees, soil sampling, tree coring, taking peat cores.	Situations you expect to be the same, but are very different – particularly the relationship between men/women. That is much more tricky – the problem is when you get in a situation where maybe things get mixed up and misunderstandings occur.	The kinds of differences that are so different from anything that you encounter normally are easy to adapt, such as – understanding how the culture of the country you visit is different, and adjusting your own behaviour to fit. Finding a way to get out of situations when misunderstandings occur – trusted people to talk to and places to go – and importantly a willingness to use those 'escape' routes.
India and Oman (4.5-months at sea and 3-weeks in each country) Lecturer, UK	Sampling seafloor sediment and animals for biogeochemical studies.	Work conducted from British or Japanese research vessels, but logistics handled in ports in India and Oman, lack of familiarity and understanding of how business was conducted in the countries in question. In both countries it was difficult to understand the thoughts of the people we were dealing with, and therefore we didn't really have a good idea of what to do to make things happen (more smoothly or, indeed, at all).	Having local contacts to do a kind of cultural translation was extremely valuable. Working with local scientists who could speak to suppliers. Clearer communications and understanding of each other's motivations.

8 Recommendations

8.1 For universities and ethics review committees

8.1.1 Ethical guidelines

In addition to the general guidelines, develop a range of ethical guidelines for different types of fieldwork, which require students to highlight how this contributed to their own learning. These different types of fieldwork may include:

- short fieldtrips in both human and physical geography (where engagement with human participants is very limited);
- UG and TPG dissertation research;
- PhD thesis research.

8.1.2 Partnering with local institutions

Institutions should look towards creating partnerships in different local contexts through which fieldtrips and fieldwork for students could be facilitated. This will help avoid some of the challenges of translation and the biases in knowledge production within local contexts that are both different from and similar to those of the students who insert themselves there. This does not mean valorising or patronising the local, rather working in partnership with local organisations and institutions to increase sensitivity and long-term relations with particular landscapes.

8.2 For academic staff and supervisors

8.2.1 Training needs

- The training needs of students embarking on field visits should become simultaneously *broad and detailed*.
- At a broader level, the training should:
  - include discussions of an ethics-based approach to fieldwork and how it is shaped by power, positionality and reflexivity;
  - formulate a list of best practice examples with scenarios and role playing that will enhance students' understanding of the complex ethics of fieldwork negotiations.
- At a more detailed level, there should be more discussion of the strengths and weakness of the different types of field visits (volunteering, study trips, fieldwork and so on) with students, so they are more aware of their own and participants' positions within local power structures.

8.2.2 Specific to fieldtrips and short visits

Engage in detailed briefing and debriefing sessions with students that familiarise them with the context, not just in terms of academic scholarship but also in a general cultural sense. This might include:

- generating reading lists of location specific academic literature as well as more general reading material that familiarise students with the social/cultural/political norms and practices;
- pointed discussions around ethics and negotiations of difference during short visits such as fieldtrips, including scenario building role playing and discussion of best practices;
- support personal development of students as ethical visitors.

8.2.3 Provide continued support and advice to students who are in the field for longer durations

- Maintain regular contact via skype/email.
- Encourage student(s) to send regular 'notes from the field'.

8.3 For researchers and students

8.3.1 Enhance familiarisation and flexibility

Enhance familiarisation with local contexts, participants or issues through reading materials, fieldtrips or pilot research. A crucial aspect of this familiarisation, as discussed in this report, is to see shorter trips as the introduction to longer engagements with the field, rather than seeing them as short-term CV enhancing tools. Making this shift in mindset around considering the long-term value of fieldtrips would be challenging in the current economic climate but would yield a more rewarding experience for long-term career opportunities.

Enhancing flexibility means becoming familiar with the number of contingencies that may challenge the continuation of fieldwork. This does not necessarily mean that all contingencies can be predicted, but about developing a mindset which makes the researcher flexible in the face of adversity and challenge. Flexibility might entail a number of things including modifying research methods and themes, changing strategies of recruitment, shifting working days and hours in the field and so on. Flexibility is the key to successful negotiations of difference in the field.

8.3.2 Consider fit between yourself, fieldwork context and research methods

Before and during the fieldwork researchers need to continually reflect upon their role in the field and the fit between themselves, their fieldwork contexts and their research approaches. Particularly in the case of interviews and participant observation, a researcher's personality and openness to difference is central to recruiting participants and dealing with difference ethically. So

researchers need to reflect continually on each encounter with difference, learning from this experience, comparing this to best practices in the field and finally taking the decision to modify fieldwork if the fit between themselves and the fieldwork is deemed unsuitable.

9 Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the respondents who replied to my call in the Critical Geography list-serve for answers to questions around negotiating difference during fieldwork. Although their identities have been kept anonymous, their contribution has been central to the completion of this resource. I am also grateful to the participants in the focus group within the Citizenship and Belonging research cluster within the School of Geography in the University of Leeds, who also discussed many of the themes in this resource and provided additional guidance in this area.

10 Further resources on this topic

10.1 Books and book chapters

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Burgess, R.G. (1991) *In the Field: An Introduction to Field Research.* 2nd ed. Allen and Unwin: Sydney, NSW.

Chopra, R (2004) Encountering Masculinity: An Ethnographer's Dilemma. In: *South Asian Masculinities: Context of Change, Sites of Continuity.* Eds. R. Chopra, C. Osella, and F. Osella. pp.36-59. New Delhi: Kali for Women.

Coffey, A. (1999) *The Ethnographic Self: Fieldwork and the Representation of Identity*. Sage: London.

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Hammersley, M. (1999) *Taking Sides in Social Research*. Routledge: London

Haraway, D. (1990) Situated Knowledges. In: *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: the reinvention of nature*. Routledge: London.

Homan, R. (1991) *The Ethics of Research.* Sage: London.

Punch, M. (1986) *The Politics and Ethics of Fieldwork.* Sage: London.

Renzetti, C.M. and Lee, R.M. (1992) *Researching Sensitive Topics*. Sage: London.

Robson, C. (2001) *Real World Research: A Resource for Social Scientists and Practitioner Researchers*. 2nd ed. Blackwell: Oxford.

Whyte, W.F. (1985) *Learning from the Field.* Sage: London.

10.2 Journal articles

Ali, S. (2006) Racialising Research: Managing Power and Politics. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. **29** (4), 471-486.

Broadhead, R.S. (1984) Human Rights and Human Subjects: Ethics and Strategies for Social Research. *Inquiry.* **54** (2), 107-123.

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Duster, T. *et al*. (1979) Field work and the protection of human subjects. *American Sociologist.* **14**, 136-142.

Kalra, V.S. (2006) Ethnography as politics: a critical review of British studies of racialised minorities. In: *Writing Race: Ethnography and Difference, Ethnic and Racial Studies*. **29** (3), 452-470.

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Song, M. and Parker, D. (1995) Commonality, Difference and the Dynamics of Disclosure in In-Depth Interviewing. *Sociology*. **29** (2), 241-256.

Steven, I. and Vanderstaay (2005) One Hundred Dollars and a Dead Man: Ethical Decision Making in Ethnographic Fieldwork. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*. **34** (4), 371-409.

Vanderbeck, R. (2005) Masculinities and Fieldwork: Widening the Discussion. *Gender, Place and Culture.* **12** (4), 387-402.

Wax, M. (1980) Paradoxes of 'consent' to the practice of fieldwork. *Social Problems.* **27** (3), 273-283.

10.3 Online guides from professional organisations

AAA (2012) Principles of Professional Ethics. Available from: http://www.aaanet.org/profdev/ethics/upload/Statement-on-Ethics-Principles-of-Professional-Responsibility.pdf [accessed 21 June 2013].

AAA (n.d.) Ethics Resources. Available from: http://www.aaanet.org/cmtes/ethics/Ethics-Resources.cfm [accessed 21 June 2013].

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ISBN 978-1-907207-90-7

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