

Dog Bites and Gastrointestinal Disorders: Our Everyday Bodies in Teaching Anthropology and Fieldwork Preparation

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Abstract:

What are the physical experiences of fieldwork really like? This article invites anthropologists engaged in teaching to transform the way research methods are currently taught to include frank and thoughtful conversations on how bodies, in their mundane physicality, are implicated in fieldwork. While the (mindful) body that actively and purposefully engages with the reality under investigation has gained centrality in anthropological discussions about “being there”, the body that things happen to has been ignored or marginalised. We contend that an exploration of the body that falls ill, feels uncomfortable, or simply does not match with an idealised image of the skilled and productive fieldworker (often male and able-bodied) has practical, pedagogical, political, and analytical merits. By recounting some of our own private anecdotes of challenges encountered in fieldwork, we emphasise the centrality of our physical experiences to our ethnographic approach. Discussing the glamourless, bodily aspects of fieldwork is crucial to preparing ourselves and our students for fieldwork, to combating ableism in anthropology, and to downplaying anxiety over narrow standard goals of “good” fieldwork. We also argue that theoretical considerations of the messy and unpleasant physical experiences that fieldwork involves can bring further insight into how research is (un)done.

Keywords: ableism, body, fieldwork, methods, pedagogy

Introduction

“Ethnography is a method of knowledge based on placing the body forward. In other words, the scientist places her own body as a field of experimentation.” (Claudio Lomnitz 2013)

In this paper, we aim to start a conversation about the importance of the body and its “physicality”, particularly with educators and students. We call for a more “realistic” and mundane (glamourless) rendering of what it means to be in the field. For some reason, it seems that talking about fatigue, colds, fevers, and common gastrointestinal disorders has been dismissed as unworthy of attention, these experiences considered mere incidents or secondary effects of fieldwork that, once solved, do not contribute anything important to our research. We strongly disagree. It is true that falling ill or feeling uncomfortable is “normal” to a certain degree, and certainly common. We argue, however, that the physicalities of these experiences are worth exploring and reflecting upon: important revelations about how it affects “being there” could result. At the very least, it is such a basic aspect of doing research that students embarking on their first fieldwork projects ought to think about it as part of their preparation for the task ahead. Since the inception of the discipline, it has been unclear what the proper venues are for conversations about fieldwork experiences. Malinowski logged his experiences in his now infamous separate diaries (1989), as many after him have also done. Countless others have probably not put these elements of fieldwork on paper at all, unsure of their value or place within ethnographic work. This awkward handling of seemingly useless material links to larger questions within anthropology about what counts as ethnographic data, and how the enmeshment of our own subjectivities with our research relates to the validity of anthropology as a social science. While there will most probably always exist disagreement over what to do with this data—whether it should be included in and lengthen our monographs and academic articles, or surface in accompanying readings, such as diaries and literary essays—our contention here is that one venue where these discussions must be had is the classroom.

In what follows, we reflect on the reasons and consequences that paying little attention to the unwitting implications of the fieldworker’s body in her fieldsite has and, by contrast, why and how in a classroom setting a conversation on our bodies’ strengths and vulnerabilities should be held. Our aim here is threefold: firstly, to

recognise the physicality of fieldwork and prepare students for this aspect of research; secondly, to call for a more inclusive representation of fieldwork, where diverse bodies are made visible and cared for/about; and thirdly, to highlight the theoretical value of taking into consideration the messy ways in which our mundane bodies can shape research and forward academic debates about knowledge production.

Within anthropological discussions about methods and representations, the role of the body has been examined as an important part of fieldwork. This is especially true since the rise of phenomenology as a philosophical approach within anthropology, one that underlines intersubjective processes and focuses on the body as the “locus from which our experience of the world is arrayed” (Desjarlais & Throop 2011: 89). Indeed, ethnographers have been called upon to mobilise their bodies and senses in the name of research, to make a “sensual conversion to the cosmos under investigation” (Wacquant 2006: vii). In his book *Fresh fruits, broken bodies*, anthropologist Seth Holmes explains that if he wanted to understand the life of indigenous Mexican migrants in US farms, he needed to experience the exhausting and dangerous journey from Oaxaca to the “North” in first person, and work, like the migrants in the strawberry fields and feel the incarnated reality of the lower back pain and sore knees and hips that bending over all day causes (Holmes 2013: 34). Through his fieldwork, Holmes attempted what he calls a “critical *and* reflexively embodied anthropology” (2013: 40; emphasis in original). Although Holmes’ fieldwork experience may appear extreme, and indeed it is, successful ethnography has traditionally been premised on “being there” (Watson 1999), fully immersing oneself, and, of course, managing to convey this convincingly (Clifford & Marcus 1986).

A great deal has also been written on how the body is a tool for communication and knowledge production in all societies (Jackson 1996; Stoller 1989) and how the ethnographer brings her culturally embodied set of skills and predispositions—in a word, “habitus” (Mauss 1973)—to the fieldsite. Anthropology has also interrogated the ways in which our own racialised, medicalised, and gendered bodies enter the field and are read by our research participants, and how this in turn impacts our research (Ashkenazi & Markowitz 1999; Clark & Grant 2015; Oakley 2007).

Despite these (and more) reflections on the centrality of the body in fieldwork, we argue that the actual and everyday body of the ethnographer remains partially absent in many academic works and discussions. While the body that is consciously put to work to learn from the “cosmos under investigation”, namely the one that purposefully engages in an activity that will produce embodied knowledge, does figure in these contexts, the body that does *not* figure is the one that things happen to. We are talking about the body that did not partake in phenomenological fieldwork simply because it was too ill or exhausted from life in the field, or the body that is less able, for a variety of reasons, to conduct “classic” fieldwork. Unlike the immersive physical experiences that fill us with confidence that we are pushing our own knowledge boundaries, these bodily incidents leave us feeling inadequate and like we are not conducting fieldwork as we ought to. This mundane body—surprisingly missing in methods books as well as in methods courses—demands our attention practically, politically, and analytically.

In the first section of this paper, we discuss the importance of deromanticising fieldwork and, in dialogue with existing literature on the centrality of bodily experiences in anthropology, and the normative and exclusive dimensions of this (e.g. Petty 2021), we highlight the absence of the mundane bodily experiences considered pitiful and/or insignificant from research methods teaching. Next, by offering vivid personal anecdotes (some even embarrassing) from our own fieldwork, we will reflect on how our physical experiences both opened and closed analytical doors and how we *felt* about that. Notably, these experiences were often *beyond* our control, the times when we had not chosen to insert our bodies as tools of learning, but when things simply happened to them. Finally, we discuss how these types of physical experiences, albeit anecdotal, should and could be talked about in classrooms given their value for fieldwork preparation. We call for an approach that cares for our bodies and recognises diversity in physicality, thus challenging hegemonic representations of what fieldworkers are, or should be.

Teaching Research Methods – Deromanticising Fieldwork

Discussions around participant observation are a big part of preparation for fieldwork, and methods courses for students about to embark on fieldwork commonly include sections about the challenges they might encounter. Beyond the ethics and completing the job itself, these classroom discussions also touch on mental health, relationships in the field, serious events such as violence and sexual assault, the sometimes-difficult logistics of setting up life in a new place, and even boredom.

Today doctoral students are told to take breaks from their fieldwork, to keep in touch with peers, to not be attached to a narrow golden standard of what good fieldwork is, but instead take a balanced approach to the challenge that long-term in-site research can be. Hopefully, doctoral students are no longer convinced that fieldwork is a heroic rite of passage which should be done stoically and that will lead to triumphant discoveries of others and the self, but instead have a more realistic and ethically grounded sense of the experience they are about to undertake, where they balance commitment to the research with care for themselves, and most importantly, care and respect for their interlocutors.

These franker conversations we are now having about the mental health impact of fieldwork, the acknowledgement that anxiety, stress, and depression is experienced by many, not few (Batty 2020; Davis & Spencer 2010), and the real risk of being exposed to different kinds of violence (Nordstrom & Robben 1995), including sexual assault (Clark & Grant 2015; Schneider 2020), all ensure that our students are better prepared for this part of their studies, and that universities are more cognizant of the needs of their students. These important discussions have also been accompanied with a flurry of exchanges about new sites of fieldwork, such as central banks, large corporations, or online spaces, and how these new fieldsites open new questions of logistics and ethics (Peluso 2015; Östman & Turtiainen 2016) and multi-sited fieldwork (Hannerz 2003; Marcus 1995; Tsing 2005).

But alongside these serious and exciting debates that animate and add credibility to our methodology and ethics courses, we have not been talking enough about how much “work” (in the sense of labour and fatigue) goes into fieldwork and the wide range of bodily experiences this entails. Our argument might be most obviously applied to the fieldsite where the ethnographer is in a radically different milieu to their home one, with food, bacteria, and temperature all novel to the researcher’s body. But our assertion is that it applies in all settings, including in the office, where uncomfortable chairs make their marks and where after-work drinks take their tolls—in any setting, the physicality of being there matters. So, it is time to review how we teach research methods in our classrooms and describe them in books, and ensure our discussions about bodies is sufficiently comprehensive, realistic, and inclusive. This involves a broadening of our understanding of what aspects of life in the field “count” as fieldwork.

To convey that research materialises through the lived reality of researchers involved in trial and error cycles, it has been said that “research is a craft” (Bernard 2006: 1). In his 800-page methods book, Bernard starts off saying: “If you know what people have to go through to become skilled carpenters or makers of clothes, you have some idea of what it takes to learn the skills for doing research. It takes practice, practice, and more practice” (Bernard 2006: 1). Drawing on Bernard, we contend that *what people have to go through* is usually overlooked and that, as teachers, we tend to offer students the successful formulas, those that we think will make their research processes more effective. Yet, talking about mistakes, failures or accidents is healthy and constructive, as psychology professor Johannes Haushofer evidenced a few years ago when he published his CV of career failures (The Guardian 2016). This public listing of his “failures” was a way for him to humanise academic trajectories, career paths which are always predicated upon “excellence” and can have negative psychological impacts on scholars, especially students and early-career academics, who end up “attribut[ing] their own failures to themselves”. A narrow understanding of success in academia not only delimits how work is valued and creates undue pressure on all students, but also perpetuates ableism, as educational scholar Nicole Brown argues: “rather than embracing difference as a reflection of wider society, academic ecosystems seek to normalise and homogenise ways of working and of being a scholar” (2020: 5).

We believe it is our responsibility to convey a more realistic and diverse notion of fieldwork. Revealing our physical experiences in fieldwork as part of the ethnographic “craft” to a wide audience is a first step in this direction. Likewise, describing fieldwork as a complex experience where both attunement and discomfort are present will contribute to healthier and more self-confident fieldworkers as well as to more inclusive academic environments. In doing so we hope to further decentre the male able-bodied fieldworker as the measure by which “proper” fieldwork is assessed.

Our Bodies in the Field

Miranda’s Experience:

At 1 am in the morning the small bus arrived into the city of Cochabamba, Bolivia. I had spent the day at a village celebration and annual *toro tinku* (bull fight) in one of my previous fieldwork sites and now, having been

offered and unable to say no to many cups of *chicha* (fermented maize beer) and shots of hard liquor, I was thirsty, tired, and suffering with a headache. The bus drove through the city's neighbourhoods heading towards its designated roadside station closer to the centre of town. I was worrying about taking a taxi alone this late at night from the bus stop back to my house when I noticed that we were not far from my home and so asked the bus driver to drop me at the next corner. Alighting the bus, I soon realized what a poor decision I had made, close to the city airport and the river, the streets were very empty and quiet. I walked swiftly, feeling increasingly uneasy. From a side road three dogs appeared. Protecting their turf, the dogs barked at me aggressively. As I hurried away from the corner, I could hear them running up behind me. Within seconds I felt the teeth on the back of my thigh.

That night and the following days involved multiple hospital and clinic visits and more importantly dealing with potential exposure to rabies. I worried about my wounds, my medical insurance, my inoculations, and I worried about my fieldwork. I had to cancel meetings, I stayed in bed, and I stayed home. In recovering from my bite, I learnt a great deal about the Bolivian inoculation program for rabies, I learnt that the ministry of health worked to track down dogs with suspected rabies, in fact I had to accompany an officer on a dog finding mission. These insights were interesting, but not related to the topic of my research, and meanwhile I was reluctant to return to the streets where I was conducting my research, streets busy with packs of dogs. I felt guilty for not working as I "should". I met up with friends and interlocutors at cafes, slowly edging my way back to the markets and streets where I "ought" to be working, yet still feeling vulnerable. My dog bite body entered a new world, one where dogs were threatening, but also where the scars from bites on other people were suddenly visible to me, where my vulnerability was met with great sympathy, desire to advise me, and admonition for ever walking alone at night. The bite shaped my fieldwork in ways beyond my control and ways that demand attention. I gained deepened intimacy with some of my interlocutors, surprising insights into bureaucratic worlds, and the way that healthcare provision featured in the lives of my research participants, conversely, I know that I missed many meetings and events which would no doubt have given me different sets of data for my work.

Conducting fieldwork in the Bolivian Andes involves living at high altitude. Altitude sickness affects people variably, with some only suffering mild symptoms for a few weeks as they acclimatize, while others have life threatening responses. I spent my doctoral fieldwork in a village that sits over four thousand meters above sea level. I was lucky and seemed to cope well enough with the altitude. But unlike I had anticipated, the initial sluggishness I experienced when I first moved to the area did not wear off after a few weeks, or even months. Half a year later I still struggled with energy and headaches. While I persevered and joined in with ploughing and herding, fiestas and football championships, the altitude undeniably affected my energy levels and my wits throughout my fieldwork period. It was a pervasive and everyday element of life in the high Andes for me and often I fell asleep in the evenings before writing up notes or even reading a novel, I fumbled my sentences as fatigue hit me, and some days I just stayed in bed.

Conducting research on altitude felt like having a continuous series of analytical doors closing in my face, all the time I was doing less than I had imagined I would do, less than other fieldworkers did. Looking back, I did plenty. I also now think about the impact my physical experiences had on my research. The fatigue caused by altitude did allow me to appreciate the chewing of coca leaves (a mild stimulant in its unprocessed form), and the relief they brought, which arguably offered phenomenological value. And like Seth Holmes' hips and back, my body ached as I joined in with my interlocutors' daily tasks of harvesting, digging, or herding. But never did I become fully attuned to the cosmos under investigation; no matter how sore my back was from digging, I never lived, loved, or suffered in those high fields as my research participants did. However, all my bodily experiences did something else—the fatigue from altitude and the aches from working connected my body to my fieldsite, allowing me to build a sensory relationship with the earth, the thin air, and the hills. It also afforded my friends and interlocutors a sense of my body in that landscape, creating languages and moments of connection and understanding.

The prevailing notion that the able-bodied cis male will somehow "participate" in a more effective fashion reveals not just the hubris of the ethnographic encounter but also a narrow evaluation of epistemic action. In other words, the supposition that a fieldworker who may be physically able to superficially mimic a wider range of the activities undertaken by their interlocutors will be a better fieldworker relies on the logic that mimicking an activity is an effective way of understanding the perspective of interlocutors. The reality is that the embodied experience of the fieldworker will never be the same as that of the interlocutors. Instead, I suggest that the value of spending time together physically lies in the array of often-indefinable ways that this deepens relationships,

conversations, and understandings. Such an evaluation of participant observation allows for a more inclusive appreciation of how our bodies produce knowledge in the field.

Laura's Experience:

When I arrived in an indigenous village of peasant farmers and fishermen in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (southern Mexico) to conduct fieldwork for the first time, I was a young woman with no experience of country life. I had never even gone camping and was largely unprepared for sleeping outdoors and dealing with flies and fleas and hot weather. In this region, temperatures vary between 15 and 35 degrees Celsius, the rainy and dry seasons mark the year, and winds blow hard, especially between December and February—lifting dust everywhere and, sometimes, making even walking difficult. While I had prepared myself for the local culture by reading key ethnological literature, I was completely unprepared for the mundane side of fieldwork. And this unpreparedness soon took its toll, despite the generous care of the family I happened to be living with. In this rural context, domestic animals—pigs, chicken, cows, and dogs—wander around with a certain freedom. My urban, bourgeois attitude of being friendly with dogs earned me a colony of fleas, my legs, belly, and back completely covered in itching blisters. In the village, dogs were certainly cared for but they were respected in their alterity and not considered objects to be cuddled.

I soon discovered how hard it was for me to sleep during the night, surrounded by mosquitos, and then work in the heat the next day. Although I was profoundly grateful to the opportunity of “being there”, getting to know people, increasingly taking part in the social life of the village, conducting interviews, and learning about the *inponderabilia of actual life* (Malinowski 1922: 18), I was often fatigued, yearning for a hammock to stretch out in. This sense of fatigue certainly hampered my capacity to keep my senses receptive to all the rich stimuli coming from everywhere and writing in my field diary in the evening or at night became challenging as I ended the day feeling exhausted. I felt frustrated and angry with myself. I wondered how much this fatigue affected my performance as an ethnographer, an unpleasant thought that haunts me to this day.

By the second and third time I went back to the village, I had become much more aware of what to expect and, at least, I'd learned to keep dogs at a distance and how to protect myself better from insects. I was unable, however, to escape fatigue and the effects of bacteria, which made me frequently ill with diarrhoea and other gastrointestinal disorders. At a certain point, during my year of PhD fieldwork, I felt such abdominal pain that I could hardly stand and walk. My adoptive mother became so worried that she made quite an important, almost drastic decision: she took me to a traditional healer, one she trusted and saw for serious family health problems. The healer was a woman whom just a month earlier I had tried to interview in vain; my research topic in the field of medical anthropology marked her as a possible source of valuable information.

When we arrived at her place, her husband saw me and immediately said, “This will not work since people like her [pointing at me] do not believe in our medicine”. My adoptive mother promptly answered, “She has been living here with me for so long that now she does”. After this defence, the healer dismissed her husband, showed me into the house, and had me approach her *mesa*, table/altar. After an inquiry into my social problems, and in front of multiple saints, she diagnosed me with *vergüenza* (shame) and *mal aire* (bad air) due to a deceased person's longing for me. Back at home, my adoptive mother treated me with *limpias*, cleansing rituals, and we went to where the dead person responsible for my *mal aire* used to live. There, we offered him candles and prayers, hoping he would be appeased and leave me alone.

This was the only time I managed to see a traditional healer at work, so at least my malady ended up achieving some positive fieldwork-side-effects. Another aspect I would like to highlight is that acute cases of illness can help to reveal how great a part of a family and a place you have become. My adoptive mother's words, “Now she believes”, struck me as a clear sign of my integration into the local social fabric as well as my adoptive mother's heart.

Despite these unpredictable positive outcomes, placing my body under stress and resorting often to both biomedical and folk medications had a major physical impact on me (fortunately only temporary), something that manifested itself through a number of somatic expressions and sensations, including weariness, weight gain, and lack of menstruation.

Finding myself speaking publicly about these physical experiences for the first time ever feels strange. It is even costing me some effort to write down these lines, which are so personal and private. I wonder why this physical

aspect of fieldwork has been largely absent from conversations with colleagues. Is “suffering” or “feeling unwell” just a normal, expected part of fieldwork, something implicit that goes without saying? But why does it go without saying?

All ethnographers have their stories of the physical ups and downs of fieldwork. Glandular fever, uninterrupted diarrhoea whilst travelling with interlocutors, infected insect bites, fatigue, insomnia, allergic reactions, are only a few of the physical experiences that our colleagues and friends have shared with us. Most of these events profoundly impacted their life in the field, none of them feature in our collective body of publications, and few are mentioned in the classroom. Instead, these remain personal stories that we separate out from our work and only share with those closest to us, if at all. They are all associated with feelings of shame and a sense of failure—they all tell stories of when fieldwork was seemingly unproductive and when we experienced a loss of control over bodies and over our ability to do our job in the field.

In what ways would describing these kinds of physical experiences be relevant to neophytes approaching fieldwork for the first time? How could such an itchy topic—the glamourless aspects of physically “being there”—be included into methods courses? And why is it important? Broadly we contend that talking about the everyday body will have three key outcomes: a more rigorous and honest preparation for fieldwork for our students, a conscious and political commitment to care for bodies and counter ableism, and a deepening of our critical analysis of ethnography and how our bodies are integral to the work that we do.

In the Classroom

About to go to Africa for the first time, I had conscientiously rooted about among my acquaintances for helpful information. On their advice I'd been inoculated for yellow fever, smallpox, typhoid and paratyphoid, tetanus, typhus, and only my own reluctance had saved me from a cholera shot. I had gone to a tropical outfitter in England, and had been expertly outfitted with all manner of folding equipment, with evening dresses (trouble to pack and seldom worn), a soda siphon (an unmixed blessing) and an elaborate set of silver, dishes and glassware (a nuisance, but good for my steward's morale). The outfitters said I would be able to get nothing at all in West Africa. The wife of a trader on leave told me I could get everything I might want there. Both were right, from time to time. My main trouble had been that I had no idea of what I might need. My own imagination carried me no further than a typewriter, paper, notebooks, and a miscellany for reading: detective stories, desert-island stand-bys like Shakespeare and the Bible, and a terrifying handbook of tropical diseases. I had myself introduced to ex-traders and retired administrators. They all recommended a meat grinder to make goat meat edible and curry powder to make it palatable; unanimously they instructed me to trek early (“trek” in West African English covers almost any distance of walking), to sleep in the heat of the day, and at sundown to bathe, put on a sweater and have one drink with my quinine. I was grateful, but I wanted to know more. Anthropological advice, though much less consistent, was equally limited. [...] The best advice, in the long run, came from the ripe experience of two professors of anthropology. One said, “Always walk in cheap tennis shoes; the water runs out more quickly.” (Bohannon 1954: 3-4)

As this quote from 1954 illustrates, the desire for practical advice on how to prepare for fieldwork is neither new nor has it generally been pre-empted by training or met with openness and clarity. Talking about the physical aspects of being there can encourage students to get ready for fieldwork not only through literature reviews but also in practically planning their access to the field, be it “at home” or “far away”. At a most basic level, students should be advised to review information about health and safety in their fieldsites. Although this is increasingly part of fieldwork approval procedures, risk assessment is usually realised apart from core methods courses as a parallel, bureaucratic procedure. Confronted by the numerous boxes about safety measures and risk mitigation that need to be ticked, students may understandably be left feeling disoriented or perceive this as a dry paperwork requirement. By contrast, discussing the physicality of fieldwork in classroom would help students to take this aspect seriously and stimulate in them an awareness and sensibility towards themselves as bodies immersed within a wider environment. This involves a consideration about how we should care for our bodies in all their diversity, how we might experience altitude or heat, and how we plan to rest. This preparation will vary from person to person, considering their particular body. Bodies that menstruate and can become pregnant involves a certain kind of care, differently abled bodies have different needs and will encounter unique challenges in the field. An important step towards caring for our bodies and promoting fieldwork as an inclusive mode of working, as opposed to an elitist one, is to have more honest conversations about the physicality of fieldwork.

As such, discussing the mundane physical life of fieldwork in the classroom is a way to deromanticise both fieldwork and the experienced fieldworker. This helps to break down potential distance between students and teachers, and perceptions that teachers or seasoned fieldworkers are somehow qualitatively different from non-veterans—audacious and productive. Although courage, ability and practice are key ingredients to conducting fieldwork, an exaggerated imaginary of what a gold standard involves can be detrimental to students. This is a crucial move to undo ongoing ableism within the discipline and the inclusion and valuation of diverse bodies and perspectives. Communicating a more realistic image of us doing fieldwork can help to downsize the figure of the heroic fieldworker and enable the student to better prepare for fieldwork, both practically and emotionally. Speaking openly about these issues will encourage awareness that getting sick or feeling unwell is not a sign of weakness, but instead a quite probable event that should not cause shame but be considered a legitimate concern to raise.

This implies that universities need to establish services designed to support and protect students in the field, as well as rethink the student-supervisor relationships. Although teaching and supervision are premised on academic freedom and on different styles and approaches, discussing what being an academic advisor means and the types of responsibilities implicated in supervising is crucial. Such a conversation should be directed towards protecting students, enabling teachers to recognise and respond adequately to problems, but also to setting the limits of teachers and supervisors' responsibilities. From a pedagogical perspective, the benefits of research-led teaching and a connected curriculum, where open dialogue with students and a more symbiotic relationship between university research and student education is promoted, has been well established (Fung 2017; Healey 2005). Our move is located squarely within these broader efforts within the academy, which aims to promote both improved quality of teaching and invigorate research initiatives.

Our second point is therefore that a commitment to caring for diverse bodies involves recognising the ableist discourses and structures that still saturate our institutions and our approach to fieldwork. This requires talking more directly about current discriminating expectations of fieldwork and against “structural silencing” of physical disability (Radher 2018). Testimonies from current and recent doctoral students make it very clear that our methods teaching is ableist, discriminating in multiple ways against disabled students, including through issues of accessibility and accommodations, financial support and in the perpetuation of a narrow understanding of “real fieldwork” which excludes a vast array of bodies and experiences (see for instance Friedner, Kasnitz & Wool 2018; Radher 2018; Streuli 2020; Vieth 2018). In the words of Micha Radher:

The normative frame for anthropological field research—typically involving a year or more of living in an unfamiliar location—is inaccessible to those with chronic illness or disability, or who otherwise require frequent access to medical care. My ethnographic methods course in graduate school defined the body as an “idiosyncratic knowledge apparatus... your major technology for ethnographic learning.” Yet the course offered no acknowledgement of differently abled bodies, nor how research methods might respond to differently structured health needs (2018).

While disability studies and ableism are defined and developed areas of research, little work has been undertaken in relation to the higher education context (Brown 2020: 4). This is concerning as academia is an area that needs to undergo considerable culture change in order to move away from rigid understandings of perfectionism and productivity, and to embrace disability as an asset (ibid: 4). Within anthropology, disability studies, namely the subfield of medical anthropology that takes disability as its object of study, may be well developed but the centring of expertise and knowledge produced through differently abled bodies, what Cassandra Hartblay calls “disability anthropology” (2020: 27), poses a new set of questions for anthropology and wider academia, questions which we have only recently begun addressing but which are generating poignant conversations for the theory and practice of anthropology (e.g. McKearney & Zoanni 2018, Petty 2021). This is the intellectual and political space that we believe a more honest discussion about our bodies in the field can contribute to. In terms of research methods teaching, recognising different abilities and needs translates into renewing our research toolkit and conceptualisations of “being there”. For example, digital ethnography opens up virtual spaces in which to conduct research that does not necessarily require personal presence. Researchers with disabilities or living with family members with disabilities have claimed their “epistemic privilege” and employed autoethnography as a theoretical and methodological approach, and our understanding of how our senses and perceptions relate to data collection offers new ways of approaching the role of the body in ethnographic work (Petty 2021).

Finally, including a discussion of this type in methods classes would be useful in relation to what the fieldworker will consider noteworthy in the field. Standard methodological recommendations about fieldwork documentation prescribe to keep field notes and diary separate; while the diary is personal, field notes are the raw

material for later analysis and interpretation (Bernard 2006: 391); the diary remains private, field notes become ethnography. However, recent methodological and theoretical turns to embodied anthropologies (see the example of Holmes in the Introduction) defy such sharp distinctions and call for a more integrated approach to note taking.

The physicality of being there becomes, therefore, an interesting discussion with wider epistemological ramifications. Importantly, it ensures a vibrancy in the debates about what constitutes “work” in fieldwork (Breglia 2009), what counts as a valuable experience, and to encourage students to think through these questions before, during and after fieldwork, as well as further the disciplinary conversations about the place of this data in our writing. Centring these physical realities also pushes us to think about how our personal and professional selves necessarily coexist in the field, how this ambiguity and messiness is exactly what enables us to “be there”, whilst simultaneously being a source of anxiety, stress, and shame around our activities in the field. This move aims to recover elements of a fieldwork experience which may be considered as failures, such as “lazy days”, the many planned meetings that never come to fruition, boredom, ongoing exhaustion, illnesses, and so on, both in order to perhaps extract valuable insight from these elements but also to acknowledge that these are unavoidable and fundamental parts of fieldwork, not to be hidden away or feel shame over, but to be noted as part of life in the field.

Conclusion

My feet began to hurt. I had not yet learned the trick of walking without socks in tennis shoes. The water leaked out, just as the professor had foretold. However, he had obviously thought it an insult to my intelligence to add that I must wash them out at each stream; otherwise the pebbles and bits of gravel stay inside the wet shoe to create blisters, break blisters and finally work inside the blister. Twelve miles as the crow flies. I began to regard every wind and turn in what I then thought an extraordinarily sinuous bush path as an enemy. I stopped. My entourage went on. I yelled. (Bohannon 1954: 5)

It was 1954 when Elenore Smith Bowen, penname of anthropologist Laura Bohannon, published *Return to Laughter* an anthropological novel to which she entrusted the intimate aspects of her fieldwork in Nigeria. At that time, disclosing personal details in ethnographies was still taboo, particularly for female researchers, fighting against gender prejudices and struggling to establish themselves as respected professionals at the same level of their male counterparts. It is not surprising, then, that Bohannon wrote under pseudonym and included the physical and emotional aspects of being there into a novel for a wider audience rather than into an ethnography (Gottlieb 1997: 2).

Although we share the concerns about the perils that talking (too much) about oneself as a fieldworker can produce: “complacency, condescension and narcissism” (Descola cited in Gottlieb 1997: 2), we also hope that by now speaking or writing about the physical aspects of doing fieldwork is no longer taboo. Above all, we think that an open discussion of the unwitting embodied effects of fieldwork should become part of our students’ anthropology training and our collective classroom conversations. This is a question of transparent teaching, inclusive pedagogy, and theoretical value.

Surely, one of the greatest merits of ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation is that it is not predictable, that it answers questions we had not thought to ask, and that it bends and flips our theories and presumptions. During fieldwork, the body too goes on a tumultuous ride, a ride that we often have little control over, but which takes us to new insights and certainly deserves to be recognised as one of the many elements that make ethnographic fieldwork such a unique experience and method of knowledge production. Likewise, a dismantling of a narrow understanding of valid fieldwork opens up a broader approach to knowledge production, where a wider range of experiences and perspectives count, and are enabled. We urge instructors and mentors to prepare students for that which can be prepared for, acknowledge that which cannot be prepared for, and destabilise current value hierarchies of knowledge production. This is about a duty of care to our students, a political commitment to disciplinary inclusivity, and academic integrity. We can start by having frank conversations about the physical experiences of our own fieldwork.

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