



## **Where's my comfort zone?: Reflections of two Aussie researchers abroad**

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# Where's My Comfort Zone?

## Reflections of Two Aussie Researchers Abroad

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### INTRODUCTION

With ethical approval in hand; flights, visas and accommodation sorted; bags packed; and a trail of email communication that (loosely) gives you access to an overseas fieldwork setting, the plan is underway to travel abroad to undertake your research. But what can you expect when you get there? Have you packed enough physical (and intellectual) gear to get you through? How might you keep it (and you) from completely unravelling?

The purpose of this chapter is to offer a guide for postgraduate students who are considering undertaking fieldwork overseas. University faculties of all disciplines increasingly enroll research students who undertake their fieldwork away from home/host campuses in disparate cultural settings. This seems to be an emergent symptom of the globalised knowledge economy (Robinson-Pant, 2009), albeit a pretty exciting one if you are the person with their bags packed. In our experience, the recurrently empty desks in the higher degree by research building of our faculty are symptomatic of the extensive fieldwork trips that many of us take in the pursuit of data.

We recognise that of course the objective of a postgraduate project is to draw on the data that you collect in order to add to the body of knowledge on a particular subject. However, some ambivalence as to whether or not one's work will have an impact can often travel with students to their research sites. Navigating unfamiliar territory—either geographical, physical or intellectual—can feel like falling

into an “abyss of discomfort and uncertainty that ... is seldom described in the literature” (St. Pierre, 2004, p. 332)—or at least we would argue, is seldom described sufficiently to help us to ease our anxieties. Taking to a field of study in another country for its rich, context-based appeal—language, customs and cultures—can easily push us out of our comfort zones and into situations where our outsider status demands methodological innovation and/or the restraint of expectations. Both of us experienced this in different ways while conducting our research.

We each left the comfort of our university campus with its reliable supply of good coffee in Melbourne to travel abroad. Kate travelled to Timor-Leste (East Timor)—where the coffee is also good—to gather local perceptions and experiences of improved water sources in small rural villages. The aim was to develop an understanding of the links between the social and technical aspects of water supply. Ben sought the perspectives of students with disabilities on their inclusion in secondary schools in Spain. His objective was to learn about and contrast the effectiveness of inclusive education in the Mediterranean country against that of Australia. The coffee was plentiful and cheap.

In both projects we cross the boundaries of research paradigms and cultures. We each claim a research agenda that engages with the complexities of mediated voices, interdisciplinarity, empowerment, and researcher reflexivity. We both have an explicit objective to contribute to a social science that engages critically with contextualised narratives.

## TRAVELOGUE

East Timor is a tropical island, but not the sort that involves lazing by the pool with frou-frou drinks decorated with paper umbrellas. After 25 years of brutal Indonesian occupation, a UN organised ballot saw Timor-Leste emerge as an independent country in 1999. The violent withdrawal of Indonesian troops left Timor-Leste with little infrastructure and a population that had been displaced and decimated by war and famine. The people of East-Timor are not culturally homogenous—different local languages and social norms are found across the country. The government of Timor-Leste is making investment in the creation of supported infrastructure including roads, schools, water systems, sanitation, health services and more. But all of this takes time as well as skills and knowledge. As with many other developing countries the supply of water in regional areas has success stories as well as dismal failures. Kate set out to learn about these, often on the back of a truck or a motorbike.

As quite the contrast, the sprawling metropolitan city of Madrid sits almost at the centre of the Iberian Peninsula, of which Spain takes up a large majority. It is a European capital that is often overlooked by visitors and potential temporary

residents for its coastal sisters. Nevertheless, as Spain's HQ of economic, cultural and political life—not to mention a historical backdrop that reaches back to the ninth century AD via struggles between Arabic and Christian rule—Madrid is a rich social setting worth exploring. The UNESCO Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994) was shaped by a delegation of 92 countries in a city not far from Madrid. The purpose of the conference at Salamanca was to improve the educational experience for students with disabilities through the legislation of inclusive practice internationally. To explore this aspect in particular in a place where inclusion was tabled as an international responsibility presented abundant opportunities for Ben to learn from the lived experiences of the young users of inclusive education in a country that was at the forefront of the policy's creation.

## WHY GO? AND WHY THERE?

For many of us the idea of travelling overseas for fieldwork is somewhat of an adventure. Going is sometimes a no-brainer. With that said, you almost certainly will have to include a convincing rationale in your research proposal. Perhaps your research cannot be done in Australia, or maybe it requires a comparison with another country. Perhaps it requires access to a different culture than that found in Australia, for the purposes of learning more about a particular situation. If you would rationalise a research trip by using one or more of these points, there is a good chance that your second year of candidature will see you packing your bags and leaving your potted plant to wilt on the desk of a less fortunate colleague.

Having previously lived and worked in Spain, Ben had been struck that there was one thing—among many—that the Spanish seemed to do differently. People with disabilities, he noted, were well included in the everyday fabric of society. They completed school at a similar rate as their peers; they held good jobs, and they were supported by recognisable and well-resourced organisations that emphasised people's strengths rather than their supposed deficits. With his record of research with young disabled people who attend inclusive schools in the Australian context, along with a continuing agenda to draw on the perspectives of education insiders to incite school reform, a plan began to take shape in Ben's mind. He wanted to know what worked differently to actively facilitate inclusion in schools in Spain. The perspectives of young people in Spanish secondary schools might provide a contrasting picture about inclusive education from that in Australia.

In Kate's case, her research questions are intimately linked with a social justice agenda in which she acknowledges that water is a human right and that toddlers

shouldn't be dying from diseases that are either non-existent, or are considered trivial in rich countries. Beyond that is an awareness that questions like 'why do water systems fail?' can only be answered by the people whose lived experience encompasses the water systems and the processes that generate them. Once you decide that you need to go overseas you may find that the rationale for *going* and the basis for exactly *where you go* may come from very different sources. So how do you choose a field location that will answer your questions without throwing up too many additional problems in terms of logistics or access?

For Kate, heading to Timor-Leste was a pragmatic decision. Her study was intended to address themes that were—and are—of concern across the developing world, and it was slightly negotiable. There were two Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) that were willing to provide some support to the research by way of the provision of access to program information and field sites but in the end one of them was more responsive and more able to assist than the other. The NGO was keen to have some outside research look at their programs in Timor-Leste and their office in Dili was happy to help out with transport and information. Kate enrolled in a Tetun course in order to learn the basics of one of the national languages, made contact with a university lecturer in Dili, packed the very slim Lonely Planet guide to Timor-Leste (Cocks, 2011) in her bag and off she went ... well, almost.

Ben's rationale was similar. Education in an inclusive school is still an aim to be achieved for many children and young people with disabilities throughout the world. While Spain was the principal country in which he hoped access to schools might be made available, there was no guiding blueprint detailing how this might take place. It was not until after several attempts when he made positive contact with a lecturer from a Madrid university—whose published work he found in a journal—that his plan took any shape.

Before you finalise your decisions make sure you have some support in the place that you are travelling to. Going overseas and trying to collect data is hard enough but doing it without contacts and support would be much more difficult, not to mention unethical. Kate had support from the NGO and freely admits that without their introductions she would never have been able to spend time living with local people in remote villages; she could never have been able to ask them questions and be part of their lives even for just a brief time. Ben found the support provided by his Spanish colleague was invaluable. The lecturer found him a desk in the office, shared contacts to help him to navigate the local university and secondary school landscapes and helped him to cross language barriers by attending most interviews with him. In general, we found that it is a good idea (and in some cases an ethical necessity) to have a university based contact in the country you are headed to. They can provide a point of contact for cultural questions, university resources and further collaboration.

## WHO ARE YOU RESPONSIBLE TO?

So you have your visa for entry to your fieldwork country stamped. You have university travel insurance and your supervisor knows (roughly) where you are. Are you now a representative of your university? Your country? Yourself? We would emphasise all three. You suddenly become the yardstick by which your university, Australia, other Australian universities and your reputation are measured. But what about the host country? Yes—you are responsible to them also. You are required to act ethically and legally, and it is also a good idea to familiarise yourself with the social norms and legal situation of the country to which you are travelling.

For Kate this actually raised a big question. Getting a visa issued for Timor-Leste is simply a case of turning up at the airport and having your passport stamped for a three-month tourist visit. Obtaining a cultural research visa was much more complicated and expensive. The exchange of many emails (most of which got lost in the ether) and lots of documentation including police checks, bank statements and letters of support from myriad organisations resulted in the arrival, about a year later, of a letter indicating that Kate was eligible for a cultural research visa. This arrived along with a full page of stipulations of what could, couldn't, or must be done in compliance. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the immigration officer at the airport appeared to have never seen a cultural research visa and so Kate's entry to Dili was delayed further as advice was sought from senior figures.

Ben's experience here was far more predictable. Given, however, that he thought that fieldwork might take over a year, Ben was advised to obtain a long-term student visa, which would earn him residency in Spain and a national identification card replete with photograph and fingerprint. Extensive paperwork straightforwardly supported the initial application. However, obtaining the ID card while in Spain was the cause of much consternation, as conflicting advice led to multiple visits to an old prison in which the country's immigration matters were processed, before legal resident status could be attained.

The wheel of bureaucracy spins on a different axis overseas and invariably at a different pace to what you might be accustomed to. Find out as early as possible what visas are appropriate and what paperwork you will need to provide. Obtaining visas takes time. It's also a good idea to make sure you are aware of your obligations in terms of your visa and your university—how often do you have to check-in? What are your supervisors' expectations to this end? Do you have the right travel insurance?

## IS IT ETHICAL?

Conducting research overseas does not automatically signal an ethical quagmire—you might be drawing on publically available library resources or accessing a

scientific facility. For many of us though, the conduct of low, medium or high risk research requires entering an ethics application process, whereby a National Ethics Application Form (NEAF) or other university-specific paperwork is to be filled in and submitted for approval to the ethics committee. This process is so complicated that universities run workshops on how best to do it. When seeking ethical approval to conduct fieldwork overseas, you will have to declare your intentions. In making this declaration you are expected to anticipate and satisfy any of the committee's trepidations. To save time and potential frustration, it is best to approach this by providing a detailed plan of your research, including the role of your overseas contact. For this reason, it is best to have prearranged with your contact his/her function as a gatekeeper to your fieldwork.

In addition, in our experience there is quite a lot of space for individuals to find themselves questioning the ethics or morals of particular aspects of their research. Working within a social justice perspective, both of us were concerned with the ethics of using the knowledge of vulnerable people to further our own professional reputations—yes, that is what a PhD does. How might we balance our research needs with the ability to 'give back'? We have a responsibility to compensate the individuals and communities that supported our data collection, enabled us to get to know them and their cultures, answered our questions, and in Kate's case, provided food and shelter. How you involve participants of your research, and the way that you will disseminate results of your research, is important.

Along with publishing papers and presenting at conferences you might undertake to ensure that participants of your research are given results in a format that is appropriate. Kate undertook to do this, and found herself making further verbal assurances after the head of a village complained to her that researchers never returned to explain what they had found. Research must be nothing less than a reciprocal activity. Participants must be at the top of your list when it comes time to verify and disseminate results. They were, after all, major contributors to its production. Please don't be a researcher who collects information from people but makes no effort to return the favour.

Giving feedback to participants of research in many cases these days is as simple as writing a brief report and emailing it off. Timor-Leste doesn't have a mail delivery service and most people don't have internet access. Giving feedback to participants in rural villages in Timor-Lest means returning in person, six hours on a plane from Melbourne, five hours in a small open sided truck on bad roads and a one hour walk uphill to a village. Kate will go back because it's the right thing to do and because her results *could* make just a small difference to the lives of her participants. She is also going because in the short time that she was there she had made friends, played with kids and had promised to come back. The relationships that she made are important.

For Ben there was a moral need to ensure that he was not seen as 'the expert'. Above all, Ben's research was designed to seek the perspectives of young people with disabilities who attended inclusive secondary schools—a unique but significant restriction that is relevant to his research perspective. Many of the students who participated in interviews seemed to doubt that it was their opinions that Ben sought over those of their teachers or parents. It was not until after being reassured that their opinions were indeed significant that they would eventually open up. Ben would later invite all collaborators—students, their parents, the administration and teachers of the schools in which the research was conducted as well as university contacts—to attend a presentation that he gave in which he detailed preliminary results and sought feedback. Ben considered that a presentation was the best way to disseminate early results to a large group, as it would be accessible to all-comers, and it might also provide a space for contributors' comments. As it transpired, comments were forthcoming. One young woman with a mild intellectual impairment who had participated in interviews stood up and offered her support to the study and its findings; while although reticent to speak in front of a large group of people, another participant who had Down syndrome nodded her approval.

If you are concerned about giving back directly to your participants then we suggest that you have a read through the special issue of the *Journal of Research Practice*, Giving Back in Field Research, Volume 10, Issue 2. It looks at some of the pros and cons of different ways to approach giving back, particularly in developing countries. Questions that are dealt with within the volume include the practicalities of what to give, or not to give (Kelly, 2014), long term benefits of research partnerships (Wentz Diver & Higgins, 2014) and building relationships and giving without overwhelming (Fiorella, 2014).

Finally, ensure that your ethics applications and your funding are coherent with your 'report back' intentions. Getting to the end of your research and lacking the funding or impetus to report back to participants is awkward at best and it can reflect badly on you as yet another self-interested researcher.

## IS IT OK TO FLY BY THE SEAT OF YOUR PANTS?

No! It isn't! You need to plan as much as possible. Sometimes even the best of plans go astray via cultural misunderstanding. Sometimes you need to respond to unexpected circumstances with innovative solutions. For Kate this was exemplified with the realisation that it was difficult for residents of villages to answer theoretical 'if-then' questions. Finding a way to work with this unexpected restriction on her interview technique required a change in approach and some research innovation.

The solution? She told stories about fictional villages where water systems broke down and asked questions about what the fictional characters should do.

Similarly, Ben found that many participants were initially reluctant to talk about their schooling experiences. Teenagers, it would seem, are not as enthused by inclusive practice as some PhD students. Ben found that by incorporating more dialogue—sharing more about himself and his experiences, and drawing on commonalities with the young people—the silent students opened up more. Similarly, in pushing the lecturer from Madrid University to act more as a contributor rather than a translator, Ben found that her knowledge of local culture and educational practices helped the young people to be more relaxed and forthcoming. These simple yet important strategies used by both of us are emblematic of the coproduction of research, in which the voices of all participants—including researchers—are significant to its composition.

You probably can't be prepared for every eventuality, so try to be flexible. Make sure that you have organised to spend more time in your field sites than you think you will need. Kate went back to one village three times before she could stay. Firstly, because the village had experienced a death and then the illness of the head of the village created a further delay. Ben was involved in fieldwork at a time of considerable economic and political upheaval in Spain. If it was not the transport system shutting down across Madrid in protest to public sector cuts one day, school students were arranging 'occupy classroom' days the next to express their discontent at similar cuts in education. Try to take delays and problems with good grace, if you are working with vulnerable groups then you probably *can* push them into working with your timeframe and methods, but *should* you? We would also advise giving of yourself rather than just asking questions—both of us found that talking openly about our experiences, our family and how we feel, opened up dialogue and helped participants to relate to us. We also both found that being laughed at—for language mistakes, falling over in a river or squealing about the leeches—and enjoying the joke with our participants, liberated us from being the 'outsider expert'.

## CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING (AND BEING RESTRAINED BY LANGUAGE)

Locating your research in another country in which the dominant language is not your own will likely draw out complexities as you wrestle to make yourself understood either with or without a translator. It is easy to presume, though not always accurately, that your language skills will get you by, or that your translator fully understands your needs and your project.

Even when it seems that the language is clear there can be misunderstandings. Ben's grasp of Spanish is quite good. However, at times he struggled to get the intended meaning of his question or comment across to all of his research participants. Ben became aware at these moments that the translator also miscommunicated his meaning on occasion—leading to missed opportunities in the dialogue. Apprehension about transgressing a cultural barrier at these times kept Ben from revisiting these conversations with participants.

For Kate, the word for 'research', which is '*peskiza*' in Tetun created some confusion. Staff at the NGOs were quite adamant that residents of small remote villages would understand the idea of '*peskiza*' as they commonly used it. It turned out that for most participants from remote villages, their experience with research was limited to the needs analyses or project evaluations that NGOs generally conduct. This meant that when Kate introduced her project as research or '*peskiza*' it was initially misconstrued. The result of this confusion was that initially some residents saw Kate's visit as an opportunity to lobby for better services and others felt they were being tested. Obviously Kate had to find better ways to describe her research project. Try and learn some of the local language before you go. When you are surrounded by non-English speakers, it is easy to feel isolated and uncomfortable. Being able to say a few words, or even hold a very short conversation, is worth a few nights of study before you go. Kate found that understanding a little Tetun meant that she could follow conversations and picked up when her translator made inadvertent mistakes. Read the guidebook—it might seem a bit naff to walk around with the Lonely Planet sticking out of your bag, but they are useful and they generally have good information that will stop you making too many cultural blunders.

## DOING RESEARCH IN THE ABYSS

In this chapter we have discussed some of the challenges that you are likely to encounter when planning and conducting overseas fieldwork. Collecting your data in an overseas setting can be confronting, difficult, lonely and fraught with complex logistical arrangements. At the same time, it can be an inspiring, lovely, collaborative, and supported exercise that helps you to discover more about yourself and your participants. We both travelled through different countries with very different research questions. We both maintained our principal agendas of engaging with local people in the ways that suited their participation. We also both maintained a practise of sharing, listening, laughing and engaging with participants beyond the needs of the research, and we endeavoured to give back at the end.

Did we fall into the abyss of discomfort? Yes—daily. But who doesn't?

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