



BUT WHAT DO YOU DO? DEALING WITH STICKY QUESTIONS AND SITUATIONS

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I recently returned from nine months “in the field.” While this explanation of my absence was accepted easily by fellow graduate students, other friends and family less intimately involved with academia were wholly nonplussed—“In the field? What do you mean?” they asked. The response that I was conducting fieldwork was greeted by blank looks and the disconcerting question, “But what do you do?” This is a question that social science researchers sometimes shirk since detailing the intricacies of participatory action research, in-depth interviewing, or grounded theory may not be considered the most interesting topics for small talk. Yet, explaining what exactly we do while we are “in the field” is critically important, not only to communicate the purpose of our work, but also to learn from each other’s experiences.

One of the only books that I have come across to comprehensively describe the actual process of fieldwork is Paul Rabinow’s *Reflections on fieldwork in Morocco* (University of California Press, 1977). Rabinow writes candidly about his sometimes boring, often hilarious process of conducting fieldwork. Here, I do not have the space to give a similarly comprehensive description of mine, but I would like to discuss some of the ways in which my fieldwork has continuously re-worked assumptions and prior conceptions that I brought with me into the field. My field experience thus far has consisted of in-depth interviewing, participant observation and attendance at many community and watershed related meetings, manual labor on a watershed restoration project, and assisting in the coordination of a 4H youth program centered on watershed education in Mendocino County. The interviews constantly question my assumptions and bring to light new issues. I was surprised to find the intensity of emotion related to restoration efforts and the survival of certain fish species. This experience has encouraged me to examine restoration using the expectations of the individuals involved, rather than my own, often ecologically-biased criteria.

Setting up the in-depth interviews has been more of a challenge than I initially expected. While my first approach was to telephone people based on a parcel map of the watershed, I quickly realized that this was less than ideal since the area of California where I work is known for a certain suspicion of outsiders, and the issues that I was interested in have been a source of contention in the past. Thus, I opted for the snowball strategy, starting with contacts that I had already made in the area and building to encompass a diverse group of interests. One method I found particularly helpful was at the end of an interview to ask the interviewee to recommend other people to talk to, particularly people who might have a different point of view.

My experience working on a restoration field crew also questioned some of my initial assumptions. I originally thought that members of the work crew would have very positive attitudes towards restoration. Eventually, I learned that many of them had misgivings about their work including ethical quandaries related to mitigation projects, the feasibility of bringing back an ecosystem, and the damage that was caused simply through their activities which, in the particular project I was working on, consisted of removing invasive vegetation from highly erosive riparian areas and using herbicides. Mitigation projects provide a sizable funding source for restoration yet have been almost completely ignored by major studies of restoration, including the National Research Council’s study and the recently released NRRSS study. Tracking down the multitudes of privately funded restoration projects is often time-consuming or considered outside the scope of research. Indeed, my own research had for the most part ignored mitigation, now I am working on compiling some of the larger mitigation projects conducted in my study region.

I was also surprised that the crew that I worked with consisted of mostly white, middle-class women (not at all what I expected to find). I discovered that this was related to the particular contracting organiza-

tion, which had made a commitment to professionalizing its workforce, raising issues of a skilled vs. unskilled workforce and racialized labor. There are many different types of labor, and laborers, that are included under the umbrella of restoration--including heavy equipment operators and vineyard workers--these workforces illuminate stratification within the restoration industry in regard to citizenship, ethnicity and gender. As the restoration industry becomes further professionalized, these issues have enormous intellectual and pragmatic interest. My research now seeks to explore the political economy and labor relations that underlie the industry to a greater extent.

Finally, the 4H watershed education project that I am involved with has allowed me to interact with a larger community of individuals. Many 4H families are also involved in agricultural production, which has provided a different perspective on the philosophy and practice of restoration. The process of fieldwork has been incredibly iterative. Everyday in the field an interview or a new citation would make me think about my research in a different way. Becoming comfortable with this shifting sea has been a challenge. However, I have come to realize that pretending that I am standing on solid ground does not make the shifting stop; it only makes me less responsive to the movement.