Get Organised: The 'Do's' Preceding Successful Field Research[1]

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Abstract

There is no shortage in the political science literature on field research regarding issues of research design, methodology, and data evaluation. Yet, the practical and organisational intricacies that precede successful fieldwork are frequently overlooked. This lack of methodical advice may be due to the impression that field research is highly contextual, and so case-specific that general guidelines, which apply to all field research endeavours alike, are inconceivable. While we acknowledge the organisational complexity of field research, we disagree with the notion that the preparatory dimension of fieldwork is by necessity unique for every undertaking. Rather, recommendations for common challenges that occur during the preparation and organisation phase of a field trip can be identified and formulated.

Consequently, we present and discuss ten organisational 'do's' preceding successful field research. Current graduate students and future field researchers will regard these ten pointers as useful hints in the organisation of their own endeavour. While the list is by no means exhaustive, the ten recommendations will lower the organisational entry costs of aspiring field researchers, and enable them to hit the ground running when arriving in the field.

Keywords: field research; practical advice; organisation; cooperation partners; fieldwork preparation

INTRODUCTION

Graduate students of political science who take their dissertation research to 'the field' all face a particular challenge: the time-consuming and often tiresome organisation and preparation of their fieldwork. Plenty of guides for general 'how to survive your dissertation'-purposes exist, and masses of publications discuss particular research design issues. Yet, the organisational intricacies that precede successful field research in political science apparently elude themselves from guide and textbook format. As a notable exception Lieberman (2004) discusses the preparation phase of fieldwork, and Hertel et al. (2009) and a recent symposium (Hsueh, Jensenius, and Newsome 2014) at least provide some practical guidance on how to plan field research. Yet, much of the advice is primarily concerned with the (important) issue of a valid research design, and less with pragmatic instructions on the actual organisation of field research. Still, the latter may be equally important for graduate students in order to minimise planning mistakes from the get-go. In reality, direct advice from dissertation supervisors and experienced colleagues coupled with a learning-by-doing approach are frequently the only strategies available for the rookie field researcher.

This lack of comprehensive, accessible, and practical advice may be due to the impression that field research is highly contextual and so case-specific, that general guidelines, which apply to all field research endeavours alike, are inconceivable. While we acknowledge the organisational complexity of field research, we disagree with the notion that the preparatory dimension of fieldwork is by necessity unique for every undertaking. Rather, recommendations for common challenges occurring during the preparation and organisation phase can be identified and formulated. In the following, based on our own and colleagues' field experiences, we single out and discuss ten organisational 'do's' in the hope that future graduate students and first-timers in the field will regard them as useful hints in the organisation of their own field research.[2] The ten points are formulated with respect to the organisation of fieldwork that happens outside of those countries where researchers are based. While much field research is also done locally and domestically, we believe that the focus on fieldwork abroad allows for a broader assessment of the organisational problems that scholars face in order to prepare field research. At the same time, many of the pointers yield insights for the organisation of domestic fieldwork.[3]

The list of ten 'do's' is presented in no particular order with respect to the chronological steps of research or their relative significance. The reader is thus well advised to pay equal attention to all pointers *in unison*. We chose to focus on the set of ten recommendations below as they represent, in our experience, crucial baseline organisational principles in the preparation of fieldwork. Our main selection criterion here is that all of the suggestions are primarily concerned with the *practical* side of fieldwork organisation. We limit our argument in that we touch upon issues of research design, data collection, or ethics only in case they are directly linked to organisational imperatives. In the pointers, we also assume that funding for the field research phase is already available (even if some of the 'do's' might be crucial for the proposal writing phase as well).[4] A thumbs-up to the reader who finds one of our points to be obvious – you have already mastered the organisation preceding successful fieldwork. To the mortals among us, this list is by no means exhaustive, but offers first starting points and extendable stepping-stones from which to initiate our field research endeavours, in order to clear the way to tackle the research questions we are actually interested in.[5]

We proceed as follows: first, we provide a brief overview of the existing literature in political science and elsewhere offering guidance to field researchers. Subsequently, we present each of our ten 'do's' one by one. Each pointer follows a common theme by pointing out *what* to do, *why* do it, and *how* to do it. For each point, where possible we reference helpful tools and provide examples for the fieldwork specific to that of political scientists (although, as we can learn from other disciplines, scholars from various fields may find valuable advice here). Finally, we conclude with remarks on the flexibility of the principles in light of the organisational pitfalls that aspiring field researchers face.

LITERATURE OVERVIEW: NEGLECTING ORGANISATIONAL ASPECTS

The graduate student as an aspiring field researcher usually faces organisational tasks, which are central to conducting successful fieldwork, but seldom explicitly discussed in academic fora. There is a plethora of publications in the political science literature about specific aspects of research design and methodologies applied in the field such as interviews (Arksey and Knight 1999, Mosley 2013), experiments (Druckman et al. 2011, Morton and Williams 2010), or focus groups (Stewart et al. 2006). Yet, these publications often ignore specific organisational issues to be addressed by political scientists before entering the field, or only mention them as a side-note. Hence, they cannot serve as starting points for the organisational aspect of fieldwork preparation.

The literature on conducting interviews serves as an exemplifier for this problem. Here, many publications and symposia deal with issues specific to the interview as a scientific method: how to conduct and code interviews (Aberbach and Rockman 2002, Harvey 2011), interview validity (Berry 2002, Dorussen et al. 2005), sampling (Goldstein 2002), techniques for asking questions (Leech 2002, Richards 1996, Stax 2004) and ethical considerations (Corbin and Morse 2003, Mitchell and Irvine 2008). Some of these publications also treat general questions as for how to get access to political elites and how to approach them (cf. Leuffen 2006, Lilleker 2003, Richards 1996). Others touch on organisational aspects. Fujii provides direction on how to work with interpreters (Fujii 2013). Hertel et al. (2009) put forward brief pointers to researchers who organise their field research specifically for developing countries. Other authors address issues of positionality, race, or gender (see symposium edited by Ortbals and Rincker 2009, or Sirnate 2014). Brooks (2013) offers navigation advice for the Institutional Review Board Process in the US. In the same volume, Reno (2013) comments on the influence of extraterritorial legality on the researcher's work before and during the field research. A recent symposium (Hsueh, Refsum, and Newsome 2014) thoroughly discusses organisational problems occurring *during* fieldwork and gives ample practical advice, but provides less of a perspective on the nuts and bolts of the *preparation* of successful fieldwork. Finally, as the laudable exception, Lieberman (2004) concretely addresses the preparatory agenda in field research – an effort we strive to complement here.

Overall the literature still has surprisingly little to say about how much successful field research depends on the solution or discussion of organisational intricacies *before* entering the fieldwork phase of your research. And yet, there are many organisational issues that virtually all field researchers face, such as research permits, cooperation with local partners, or more pragmatic aspects such as accommodation or workspace. Sharing common experiences regarding these problems can tremendously reduce the entry costs for other field researchers. Therefore, we now point to ten 'do's' which should be kept in mind during the preparation of your field research.

TEN ORGANISATIONAL 'DO'S'

1. FIND COOPERATION PARTNERS

A paramount aspect of field research is the connection with colleagues and research institutions on site, which should be initiated long before the arrival. Collaborators will be at the least an essential source of research-related and practical information, but at times can also offer research assistance, inexpensive accommodation, workspace, or simply social time-outs from stressful fieldwork. Academic colleagues offer invaluable knowledge on potential interviewees and important policy documents that are hard to come by from another country. Moreover, they might be able to provide you with access to formerly reluctant interviewees, and allow you to use them as a reference when approaching interviewees. Generally, cooperation partners can come from diverse institutions, such as local universities, research institutes, non-governmental organisations, or international organisations.

In addition to the benefits mentioned above, some organisational intricacies might be eased if the cooperation hosts allow you to use their address. While this makes it easier for further cooperation partners and interviewees to contact you or send you primary documents, a potential affiliation with a local institution usually lends your research further credibility. For example, government officials in your field country might not be familiar with your home institution, but know the reputation of cooperation partners. Generally, it is a good idea to get a temporary fellow status at a locally known and respected institution and to document this affiliation when you approach interviewees. Then again, some institutional affiliations may have negative effects on your access to research sites as well, e.g. in case potential participants have prior negative experience with your collaboration partner, or simply because of political associations. Caution is especially warranted when affiliating with state institutions, as this can impede access e.g. if the research topic is highly sensitive and happens in a context of oppression of regime critics or civil rights movements. It is therefore very important to inform oneself early on about possible complications in this respect, and to make conscious decisions regarding one's affiliation. International university rankings might offer an initial glimpse into the top research institutions in the target country. Further, in the sea of academic institutions abroad, it may be advisable to check for accreditation of these academic institutions. Often, however, topical expertise of local scholars is of great necessity, so scholars should not base their search for cooperation partners solely on institutional reputation. Alternatively, the Think Tanks and Civil Society Program at the University of Pennsylvania offers an index of over 6,500 worldwide think tanks.[6]

Furthermore, to avoid professional misunderstanding, it is particularly important to define the work relationship form the start. Does the researcher want to include local colleagues as full-fledged collaborators and co-authors in the project? Or, is an affiliation with the institution and its infrastructure sufficient, and the researcher offers mentioning this contribution? Is the collaboration merely an attempt to initiate future cooperation? The identification of common expectations is not just a matter of professional respect, but also crucial for a successful on site cooperation that enables the researcher to profit from the partners' knowledge (and vice versa).

2. GET A RESEARCH PERMIT (IF NEEDED)

After attaining a visa for the target country – which at times may be a simple single entry, or a special research visa – research permits are often required to conduct research in a specific country. Such permits are usually obtained from state agencies such as councils for science and technology or the ministries of education – related information should be obtained from the websites of these institutions or by directly calling their agents. To our knowledge, there is unfortunately no central database on research permit regulations in different countries. To be sure, the application process for permits often expensive and laborious, and should be initiated well in advance. Depending on the functionality of the administration in the target country, it can take a frustratingly long time to receive a (hopefully positive) response. Scholars in political science who often touch on socially sensitive or ideological issues in their work will likely spend considerable time on generating permit applications. Those with an ethically controversial research question might see their projects having to go through an ethics review. For these reasons, some researchers simply ignore these permits and travel to target countries without even applying for an authorisation. If noticed, in some countries one can be expelled (or even face harder consequences). Yet, to obtain a state-issued research permit has advantages beyond the official certification on paper.

First, it serves as a door opener, especially in contexts where potential research participants are unsure if they are permitted to talk to the field researcher, despite reassurance of the interviewee's anonymity. Some might simply turn down an interview request in case you cannot prove your research authorisation. Producing a research permit eases the first contact with a subject, and will make access to political officials more likely. Second, the researcher will not be in doubt about her research legitimation and legal status within a country. Clandestine techniques during fieldwork may be personally exciting and even necessary at times, but a research permit will surely reduce the stress-level of the field researcher. However, as in the case of institutional affiliation, a conscious choice has to be made in the case of conflicts between the state and potential research participants, as at times state-sanctioned research might close more doors than it opens. As a side note, it is generally a good idea to carry several passport photos of yourself with you at all times, since they are often needed to apply for permits and access on-site.

3. RECONCILE RESEARCH DESIGN AND ORGANISATIONAL COMPLEXITY

Very early in the research phase, and even prior to applying for funding, one of the biggest challenges of fieldwork is to reconcile a consistent and rigorous research design with its practicality in the field. Problems go beyond questions of how large the *N* of conducted interviews should be, or which sampling method to use given the target population's location. Project budgets, time, and geography all influence and constrain the feasibility of a research design on the ground, thereby severely affecting the reliability, validity, and representativeness of the produced results.

To state the obvious, an ex-post adjustment of research design is at the least difficult, and certainly dubious. Most problems can be identified in advance so that the research design can be drafted accordingly. Take the concrete example of the tension between research design and transport issues one of us faced within the a target country: What if two target populations identified via rigorous case selection methods are geographically a thousand kilometres apart from each other? What if road and railroad infrastructure in the target country are dysfunctional? Will the researcher be allowed or able to drive in the country, move via taxi or public transport, or is there need for a permanent driver? How do political scientists guarantee anonymity of subjects when researching politically sensitive issues? In some cases, interviews may also be held via videoconference or phone. Then again, some obstacles arise unexpectedly while on the ground and researchers deal with them in passing. To minimise unexpected practical biases, these pragmatic questions should be asked, thoroughly discussed with experienced colleagues, and addressed long before entering the field.

4. FIND A PLACE TO WORK

Besides the time scheduled for interviews, experiments, or focus groups, one should reserve capacities to do deskwork, i.e. writing e-mails, reading up on the next interviewee, coding data, etc. Sitting on the bed of a guesthouse with the literal laptop is not a comfortable and practicable option for everyone. Thus, it is prudent to get an idea about where to find possible workspace at location, if your cooperation partners at universities or local NGOs cannot offer a temporary desk. Other options are local libraries, colleagues' offices, or what the economist Ariel Rubinstein calls 'the University of Cafes' (2013).[7] Keep in mind that for some libraries and archives it is necessary to be granted access and user rights in advance, and some may require you to present an institutional letter of support. Alternatively, when choosing accommodation, one should not solely look for comfort, but inquire ahead of time if the room or guesthouse comes with a desk and other research-friendly amenities. To avoid having to carry around a large quantity of printed documents gathered during fieldwork, carrying a mobile scanner is advisable. Again, ask for permission to scan documents before doing so.

5. GET CONNECTED

Having a telephone connection is crucial to contact potential interviewees, who need to communicate directly with the researcher. In many countries mobile phones have become the principal means of telecommunication. Thus, getting a working pre-paid mobile phone connection and personal number is one of the first things to do once in the target country. In addition, depending on the necessary degree of connectedness with home and work, one might also want to check where to access a steady Internet connection, which might come with a pay-as-you-go mobile option. In industrial countries, there is usually a decent connection at universities, offices, and coffee shops. In many poorer regions of the world, network cover and broadband are increasing, and these days it is possible to have connection via USB modems. A good idea is to check if the home institution is connected to *eduroam*, which lets one use the home institution account to access the *World Wide Web* via associated local research institutions.[8] To have a fast and reliable Internet connection is a valuable asset, especially if you want to use 'Voice-over-IP'-programs like *Skype* to conduct interviews or to talk to your friends and colleagues at home. For country-specific advice regarding the best provider of both mobile and web connection just consult travel guides, or ask locals upon arrival – they will also be able to tell you about geographic differences in connection quality. When in doubt about an existing wireless Internet connection in the field, one might want to bring a fitting cable as well.

6. REACH OUT

The question of how you want to conduct your field research methodologically (by survey, phone, or face-to-face interview, experiment, or focus group) also has organisational caveats. For virtually every fieldwork the researcher needs a way to make first contact with the identified subjects. If your research sampling method requires you to survey different households in a certain area, the first contact can either be made via letter or by simply knocking on participants' doors. For other purposes, approaching participants via email might be straightforward and efficient – at least in countries where one can find stable access to digital resources and networks. Yet, reaching participants this way may be simply impossible, or too uncertain in terms of responsiveness. This may be the case in contexts where digital access is scarce, or where the subjects of the study are unlikely to use digital communication for structural or cultural reasons. For way of example, in our own experience some potential interview or co-operation partners did not respond to inquiries unless we had sent them an 'old-fashioned' letter of purpose, especially when they were retired senior civil servants or politicians long out of office. When working with interviews, it is also a good idea to approach subjects via phone or in person, and then schedule a visit for the interview on another day. Then again, in large federal countries it might not be possible to conduct all interviews personally due to time and expenditure considerations. In this case a videoconference, which you might be able to organise at the venue of your cooperation partners, embassies, or governmental departments, could be a feasible solution.

Independent of your research method, ask your subjects to suggest further contacts or participants. This not only gives insights into the participants' connection to the (epistemic) community. It also comes with the organisational benefit that access to the suggested subjects might be easier if you are allowed to use your participant's name when you approach them. However, here it is important to keep in mind questions of confidentiality and anonymity, which might be breached if prior participants details are revealed. Make sure you leave your business card with everyone for a potential follow-up.

7. BE AWARE OF YOUR TIMING AND CURRENT EVENTS

To get the timing of field research right is crucial for the success of any fieldwork. The scheduling has important implications for the availability of cooperation partners and participants, and ultimately affects participation and the data. The field researcher should consult and know the calendar at location when planning the fieldwork. An obvious point is to check when the main public and school holidays are scheduled to avoid that potential contacts cannot be reached because they are on vacation. Additionally you should confirm regional holidays, which vary considerably, especially in large federal countries. If you want to interview political elites, you should find out if it is preferable to schedule your fieldwork in the period when the parliament is sitting – so deputies and officials are at the same location – or when the chamber is not sitting and in recess, so that deputies might find more time to participate in a study.

When it comes to interviewees' responses to questions, one should be prepared that current socio-political events can severely bias what and how much participants are willing to share. External shocks and current debates might often tilt the information provided by the participant in a direction toward aspects that the field researcher did not want to inquire about in the first place. This applies especially in the time before and just after elections when political representatives might want to polish their answers for electoral considerations, or administrators worry for their jobs. Similarly, in one of our field trips, a high-level politician was just implicated in a corruption scandal on the morning an interview was scheduled, which made an open conversation, even on an unrelated topic, difficult. Therefore you should stay mindful of current debates, check the (local and national) newspapers and social media as often as possible, and make sure to think about ways to connect these presently salient issues to your general question.[9] If you are conducting research on a particular region within a country, it is a good idea to follow local debates for some time before arriving in the target country – nowadays several websites exist that offer information on local newspapers.[10]

8. SELECT PARTICIPANTS CAUTIOUSLY

Before one starts contacting participants, one should be very conscious about different organisational trade-offs related to the choice of subjects. For way of example, imagine having to choose between individuals that currently hold an elected position, former office-holders, and long-standing bureaucrats. Current incumbents might be an attractive choice, easy to identify, with their contact addresses readily available. Yet, one should be cautious regarding two potential obstacles: First, current incumbents are generally much sought after, which might make it difficult for them to accommodate a request. Second, present political operatives might not be legally permitted to share certain information, or may be unwilling to reveal their personal views for strategic reasons (e.g. electoral calculations).

In this case, one should carefully consider if former office-holders or long-standing bureaucrats could be an alternative or additional source of information, despite the drawback that it is sometimes difficult to locate them once they are out of duty (cf. Lilleker 2003, 208-209). This might necessitate a thorough analysis of historical records, policy background documents, or laborious snowball sampling among policy circles or institutions. But once located, our experience shows that former office-holders are often more willing to participate and disclose information. Usually, they also have knowledge on a longer history of events. Moreover, bureaucrats might have served under different partisan administrations, which might be especially relevant if one plans to do a longitudinal study, even though identification might again be tedious.

9. BLEND IN

Needless to say, the field researcher should become acquainted with regional and local customs before entering the target country. Local cooperation partners can again be a source of information regarding proper clothing, or forms of polite salutation. Even if you will work with local translators, it is of course desirable to gain as much knowledge as possible of the local language – even if it is just the common forms of polite greetings and expressions of gratitude. Furthermore, the gender or ethnicity of the researcher or research assistants may be an issue for the subjects' willingness to participate in some countries. Although these problems are difficult to avoid entirely, they might be eased with awareness and appropriate precautions. Dress codes are to be respected. Needless to say, participants should feel as comfortable as possible so that the researcher collects the information of interest.

Further, one should determine in advance whether small tokens to express gratitude for participation are expected. These gifts vary for different groups of participants: state administrators may not be allowed to accept any well-meant present at all, while an individual's opportunity costs of participation in a poor or conflict-ridden country are comparatively high and participants might expect to be compensated. Items may range from pencils with institutional logos to bags of sugar or rice. Offering money to participants may be frowned upon in some circumstances, but required in others, e.g. if scholars test game theoretic assumptions and payoffs in experimental designs. Researchers have to weigh the financial appropriateness in these situations. Not providing any token of appreciation may make the researcher appear ungrateful or impolite, which affects further turnout of participants. Yet, deciding which token to bring is also a question of practical dimension, as items have to be carried from home, and take up considerable weight in the field researcher's luggage.

10. KEEP AN EYE ON LOGISTICS AND TAKE CARE

Issues of accommodation, food, climate conditions, and health care at location are probably the most contextual, dependent on the budget, and subject to the field researcher's individual tastes and needs. Here, it is difficult to provide general organisational advice, and thus we only offer some limited hints. Clarify which currency to use in the target country, and whether you can pay by credit card or need to rely on money in cash. Find out what it cost you to withdraw money from your account at local ATMs, and whether you will need a bank account in the field country. Some scholars carry receipt books with them to later validate expenses with the financial departments of universities or with donors. The choice of accommodation can be utilised as a tool to generate a better access to a local network. Hostels and guest houses with common space and shared meals yield more opportunities to get into conversations with experienced others than might expensive hotels, while the latter will most likely offer a more quiet work environment. The choice of accommodation may also allow preparing one's own food (which relieves a tight budget), but locals will be able to tell the researcher where to eat economically and safely. Climate conditions on-site affect the fieldwork-schedule, e.g. rain or dry season in some geographic areas. Finally, health care requirements for traveling to the target country (e.g. necessary vaccinations and medication) need to be determined in advance. Local health care access should be checked, especially if research is planned for remote areas. Keeping a list of local emergency contacts such as your embassy or hospitals is advisable.

CONCLUSION: JUST DO IT

While we acknowledge the organisational complexity and context-dependence of field research, we believe that recommendations for common challenges occurring during the preparation and organisation phase of a field trip can be identified and formulated. We have presented and discussed ten organisational 'do's' preceding successful field research. Our hope is that future field researchers will regard these ten pointers as useful hints in the organisation of their own field research and use them quite flexibly as starting-points for organising their endeavour. While the preparation of field research is time-consuming and often tiresome, the ten recommendations will lower the organisational entry costs of aspiring field researchers, and enable them to hit the ground running when arriving in the field.

Notes

[1] We combine field research experience in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, as well as Australia, Ireland, Great Britain, and Germany. For invaluable comments, we are grateful to two anonymous reviewers, as well as to Dirk Leuffen, Federica Genovese, and the participants of a discussion on fieldwork and expert interviews, held at the University of Konstanz on May 3, 2013. Florian G. Kern would like to thank the German Foundation for Peace Research (DSF) for providing funding, and the Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law (CDDRL) at Stanford University for offering an inspiring environment for this work. Janis Vossiek would like to thank the German Research Foundation (DFG) for funding and King's College Cambridge for providing an academic home during fieldwork in Great Britain.

[2] We deliberately choose to formulate our advice positively as 'do's'. Where necessary, 'don't's' are included, but often the 'do's' imply the negative form – as the notion 'get organised' in the title implies to not approach fieldwork unprepared.

[3] In fact, there are very good reasons to conduct field research locally and domestically, ranging from sheer interest to cost issues and other logistical reasons.

[4] Yet, we do not address the process related to Internal Review Boards (IRB), which has been sufficiently dealt with elsewhere (see e.g. Brooks 2013).

[5] We use a broad definition of fieldwork that encompasses all endeavors that bring graduate students outside their offices into the 'natural environment' of their subject for a prolonged period of time to gather data, including (but not limited to) e.g. in-depth qualitative interviews, large-*N* surveys, focus groups, experiments, or archival work.

[6] See the 'Global Go To Think Tank Index' at http://gotothinktank.com.

[7] Incidentally, Rubinstein presents an impressive list of worldwide coffee places 'where you can work and think' on his website (http://arielrubinstein.tau.ac.il/university_of_cafes.html).

[8] For availability check https://www.eduroam.org/index.php?p=where.

[9] Some examples might be helpful: Use current events to inquire about the status ex ante (How has Fukushima forced you to reconsider your energy policy? In which aspects?), abstract from current debates by using counterfactuals (What would be the most important item on your political agenda if unemployment was not so high?), re-frame current policies into general questions (In how far does the last pension reform reflect a shift in political power from the young towards the old?) Even if this strategy has the obvious limitation to not completely even out biases, a hypothetical thought experiment of how these could influence the responses is, at least, a good way to prepare for this not so uncommon case.

[11] Examples can be found at http://www.onlinenewspapers.com/, or http://www.crl.edu/collaborative-digitization/world-newspaper-archive.

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