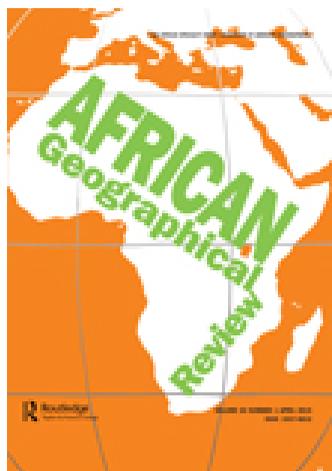


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Should I stay or should I go? Incorporating a commitment to fieldwork throughout an academic career

Kristal Jones^a, Matthew A. Schnurr^b, Edward R. Carr^c & William G. Moseley^d

^a Office of International Programs, College of Agricultural Sciences, The Pennsylvania State University, 301 Armsby, University Park, PA 16802, USA

^b Department of International Development Studies, Dalhousie University, Room 337B, Henry Hicks Arts and Administration Building, 6299 South St., Halifax, Nova Scotia B3H 4H6, Canada

^c Department of Geography, University of South Carolina, Callcott, Room 229, Columbia, SC 29208, USA

^d Department of Geography, Macalester College, Carnegie Hall, 104d, St. Paul, MN 55105, USA

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Should I stay or should I go? Incorporating a commitment to fieldwork throughout an academic career

Kristal Jones^{a*}, Matthew A. Schnurr^b, Edward R. Carr^c and William G. Moseley^d

^a*Office of International Programs, College of Agricultural Sciences, The Pennsylvania State University, 301 Armsby, University Park, PA 16802, USA;* ^b*Department of International Development Studies, Dalhousie University, Room 337B, Henry Hicks Arts and Administration Building, 6299 South St., Halifax, Nova Scotia B3H 4H6, Canada;* ^c*Department of Geography, University of South Carolina, Callcott, Room 229, Columbia, SC 29208, USA;* ^d*Department of Geography, Macalester College, Carnegie Hall, 104d, St. Paul, MN 55105, USA*

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In this paper, four researchers who share a commitment to applied research and fieldwork methodologies reflect on the ambiguities associated with maintaining and adapting this commitment to changing professional, personal, and contextual situations. The authors focus on the use of fieldwork for the study and support of agricultural change in sub-Saharan Africa, as an example of a setting and topic in which long-term work in the field can improve understanding and support contextualized development. In analyzing a range of experiences associated with maintaining and adapting fieldwork approaches, we complicate and build upon the assertion that professional development pulls international development practitioners and applied researchers away from the field. The experiences analyzed in this paper suggest that the situation of changing orientations toward the field is not dichotomous, and that instead, a commitment to fieldwork can result in innovative approaches to remaining at least partially focused ‘outward’ and ‘downward.’ We argue that the epistemological underpinning of situated fieldwork, which recognizes partiality in knowledge and understanding, also requires reflexivity on the part of applied researchers. The reflections and analysis presented here broaden and ground conversations about research ethics, methodological consistencies, and innovative approaches to fieldwork.

Keywords: fieldwork; agriculture; research ethic; reflexivity; methodology

Introduction

This paper offers reflections on and analysis of experiences with the opportunities and challenges that come from a consistent methodological and epistemological commitment to fieldwork throughout an academic career. The four authors writing here share common interests in geographical research on agriculture and food systems in sub-Saharan Africa. We have all conducted long-term fieldwork in specific communities and countries on the continent, and have built much of our personal and professional identities on generating place-based knowledge of agrarian livelihoods and change through both qualitative and mixed methods approaches. And, as we discovered in informal conversation at a recent academic conference, we all share a deep awareness of the ambiguities and ethical challenges associated with working in sub-Saharan Africa in particular, and

*Corresponding author. Email: klj175@psu.edu

the Global South more generally, as academic researchers based at North American universities with changing professional demands and responsibilities.

Chambers (1997) writes of the moves ‘inward’ (to the metropolises and ideologies of the Global North) and ‘upward’ (into management and generalization, away from the particularities field) that tend to characterize the career trajectory of the development professional or academic; an inexorable and seemingly inevitable March away from fieldwork and knowledge of place. Others (Adams, 1979; Edwards, 1989; Freire, 1970) have similarly chastised development practitioners and researchers for their tendency to drift away from the field as they move up the professional ranks, making them more likely to produce research that ignores power dynamics and the ethical implications of work conceptualized and conducted away from the field. The dominant view among these writers is that career advancement leads one away from the outward and downward orientation: one in which a researcher or practitioner is physically based in the field, in a role and with tasks that prioritize local needs and realities over those of outside organizations or institutions. By taking this opportunity to reflect on some of the opportunities and risks that we have faced as scholars of agricultural change in sub-Saharan Africa, we contribute to a literature that wrestles with the ethics and power dynamics embedded within fieldwork (Chambers, 1997; Fox, 2004; Pearson & Paige, 2012). In addition, we hope to personalize such conversations by reflecting on how a commitment to qualitative research methods and fieldwork can remain constant and dynamic, even amid changing professional and contextual demands. Finally, we challenge Chambers’ (1997) unilinear characterization of career development leading away from the field as our experiences are significantly more varied.

With this background in mind, this paper offers reflections on the following questions: can long-term fieldwork challenge the ‘upward and inward-looking’ development research trajectory highlighted by Chambers (1997)? Furthermore, how can a commitment to contextualized qualitative fieldwork remain foundational to research approaches, even as time spent in the field ebbs and flows due to changing professional and personal demands? Fieldwork and the knowledge generated from field-based research methodologies differs depending on the epistemological underpinnings of the researcher, research project, and institutional setting within which the research is carried out. As researchers engaged with qualitative methods and critical analysis have thoroughly documented, it takes more than simply a stated interest in contextualized information to incorporate a reflexive attention to power dynamics and privilege into applied research, especially when that research is conducted by outside academics working in developing countries (for discussions of gender and research, see Cornwall, 2003; Guijt & Kaul Shah, 1998; of professional privilege and research, Chambers, 1997; Edwards, 1989; Greenwood & Levin, 2007; of race and research, Hall, 2005; Kobayashi, 1994).

Much of the often-cited list of challenges facing the self-reflexive African researcher stems from privileging geographical breadth over depth (see Gokah, 2006 for an example). Staying in one place doesn’t eliminate such risks, but it does make them easier to manage. We see challenges emerging around an ongoing commitment to fieldwork as requiring recognition of the partiality and contextual nature of all knowledge generation. By recognizing that each researcher and each research approach holds both strengths and limitations, a conversation about knowledge creation, especially in complex socio-ecological environments like much of sub-Saharan Africa, can move beyond a simple dichotomy of upward/downward or place-based/generalizable.

It is not our contention that fieldwork in sub-Saharan Africa, or fieldwork in relation to agricultural research, is unique from fieldwork in other places or on other topics.

However, there are several reasons why a discussion of field research on agricultural change in sub-Saharan Africa is particularly timely and important. From 2000 to 2008, investment in agricultural research and development in sub-Saharan Africa increased by 20%. The food price spikes triggered in 2008 further intensified this commitment to agriculture as the lynchpin of African development (IFPRI, 2011; Moseley, 2011). In addition to increased interest in agricultural development and food security from bilateral development donors, there has also been a dramatic rise in philanthropic giving toward agricultural R&D in sub-Saharan Africa, due mostly to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's establishment of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa in 2006, as well as the more recent emergence of the US Government's Feed the Future Initiative in 2010 (Herdt, 2010; Moseley, 2012; Toenniessen, Adesina, & DeVries, 2008). The current focus on connecting agricultural innovation to poverty reduction in sub-Saharan Africa through a second Green Revolution emphasizes a 'silver bullet' approach to agricultural development that hinges on a few crucial technologies or techniques, and seeks to scale up and out through technology transfer and a reliance on market-oriented development approaches (Brooks, Leach, Lucas, & Millstone, 2009).

The social science research associated with this push for a new Green Revolution for Africa often employs a similar type of generalizability for measuring poverty indicators and impacts of agricultural development projects by relying on quantitative techniques, survey methodologies, and analysis of large, secondary data-sets. Given the trend toward continent-wide, scalable, generalizable agricultural research and development in sub-Saharan Africa, we believe it is more important than ever to critically reflect on the contributions and strengths of doing fieldwork using grounded, qualitative techniques, and maintaining long-term research relationships in specific communities and regions. Qualitative research and fieldwork provide access to different kinds of information and explanation than do quantitative approaches (Patton, 1990; Udry, 2003). This is especially true in sub-Saharan Africa, where relatively little data exist about events on the ground, and where we have such incomplete understandings of the pressures and motivations that shape agricultural decision-making. Long-term commitments to fieldwork in specific communities and regions also provide crucial breadth of contextual knowledge that allows a researcher to combine data gathering and analysis techniques and move from the identification of patterns and correlations to the explanation of these results, producing more robust and rigorous conclusions.

The following sections begin with a discussion of how engaging in long-term fieldwork can support a consistent outward orientation, one that incorporates alternative narratives and tacit knowledge to shape an understanding of place (Moseley & Laris, 2008). Bringing these data into the academic realm challenges and deepens understanding of, for example, agricultural systems in sub-Saharan Africa, which can lead to more appropriate interventions than those proposed by an acontextual second Green Revolution and can help to identify for whom specific interventions will be relevant and desirable. Building on observations of the ambiguous opportunities offered by engaged academic research, we then highlight the challenges associated with maintaining a commitment to long-term, situated fieldwork alongside changing professional and personal demands. We present examples of theoretical, methodological, and logistical approaches that we have utilized to balance this commitment to sustained, grounded research at various stages of our academic careers and to use the resources afforded us by academic positions to support the critical lessons we have learned on the ground. Finally, we reflect on quick decisions to move inward and upward in response to changes in safety and political stability in the field, and the ambiguities inherent in fieldwork that such a

move makes explicit. The reflections are written in the first person by each author, in order to convey the personal nature of the subject matter.

Fieldwork with an outward orientation can continually complicate and expand understandings of the field

In this section, Bill and Matthew describe how the practice and process of fieldwork has allowed them to challenge a paradigm of agricultural development that minimizes or obscures local knowledge. They reflect on how a researcher can learn to include multiple perspectives into their own understanding of place, how those perspectives and priorities can be supported through adaptive approaches to research management and local capacity building, and the particular challenges that can arise from a long-term commitment to agricultural research in a single place.

Bill

There is a lot of farming wisdom in the rural African context that is considered ‘everyday’ knowledge (Rigg, 2007). In many instances, the researcher is attempting to document and describe this local farming knowledge because it is a critical component of understanding management systems (Richards, 1985). Yet its ‘everydayness’ means that many local informants hardly find local farming knowledge worth mentioning. Further complicating a researcher’s quest to document and describe such knowledge may be a long history of top-down agricultural extension wherein local people’s farming knowledge was denigrated or belittled. Better farming, people have often been told, lies in adopting new, modern techniques. In my 27 years of working in Africa, from Mali to South Africa, I have repeatedly seen field agents talk down to farmers as if they knew nothing and that their approach was the major obstacle to be overcome. I, for example, have found agricultural extension agents’ dismissal of local knowledge to be particularly true in Mali (Moseley, 2001). Such pejorative attitudes may be the product of agricultural training in some contexts, and broader political imperatives in others (Davis, 2008).

My most palpable experience with obfuscation involved a ‘New Rice for Africa’ (Nerica) rice initiative in Mali, following the 2007–2008 global food crises (Moseley, 2011). Some, if not most, of the motivation for this initiative was political as the then Prime Minister was gearing up to run for president in the spring of 2012 (an election which never happened because of a *coup d’état* in March 2012) (Roy, 2010). While my own field work and grass roots reports suggested that this initiative largely failed, the political establishment described it as a huge success, meaning that those in the Ministry of Agriculture felt obligated to describe it in similarly glowing terms. As such, one had to learn how to read between the lines in interviews and create opportunities for informants to talk more informally and off the record. In other instances (most notably in Malawi in my own experience), I have found agricultural extension agents to be some of the most valuable key informants in terms of their broader scale understanding of local food economies (Earl & Moseley, 1996). The trick is to find those agents who have been working in an area long enough to know it well, and regularly travel between villages, so that they have an up-to-date and grounded understanding of food production and trade in the region.

Another strength of fieldwork is that time spent in the field allows one to identify and connect with groups not generally included in agricultural research, or those that

are hard to access. While much of African agriculture is dominated by smallholder farms (of which there are roughly 140 million), a not insignificant portion of crop production and animal husbandry occurs on large commercial farms involving the use of farm workers (who number about six million (USAID, 2004)). The views and attitudes of commercial farm workers are important to understand, yet under-researched because this group is often difficult to access and interview under free and confidential conditions. The first challenge is getting onto commercial farms where the farm owner may have little or no interest in talking to a researcher, let alone allowing such a person to interview his/her workers. I repeatedly encountered such difficulties while interviewing commercial farm workers in the Western Cape of South Africa (Moseley, 2007b). The key for me was to get one farm owner to refer me to another (an approach known as 'snowballing' (Patton, 1990)). The second and even more difficult challenge was to get farm owners to allow me to interview their workers (because it meant time away from the job), and to do so in a private and confidential setting. Some farm owners were clearly concerned that I would ask about labor conditions or stir up trouble for them in some other manner. Most farm owners relented to my request for private and confidential interviews once they determined that I was asking questions about relatively benign subject matter (workers' knowledge of farming practices and agroecology in this case). That said, the fact that farm owners continue to have so much power over their workers means that those exploring more politicized issues (e.g. labor conditions) will typically encounter difficulties exploring these questions.

Matthew

One of the many advantages of narrowing the geographic scope of fieldwork in my own research program is that it has created opportunities to build long-term relationships with research assistants (RAs). Much has been written about the struggle to find capable RAs (see for instance Sanjek, 1993; Turner, 2010). I have been working with the same research coordinator since I started my appointment for four years, and my hope is that we will continue working together for the rest of our careers. She is the most important person in this research project (by far!). She coordinates all the logistics, she manages a team of assistants who support her efforts, and she liaises with me constantly. The most important skill she brings to the project is that of relationship building, both with the farmers and with me. She has an incredible gift for relating to farmers, to making them feel comfortable, at ease and valued. She is equally talented at maintaining our relationship: we communicate constantly over email, Skype, and in person. I trust her judgment completely.

I agree with Turner (2010) that the single greatest disservice done by researchers working with RAs is to regard them as 'ghost workers,' and I worry that many researchers do not go far enough in ensuring that assistants are treated as collaborators, rather than employees. This means ensuring that RAs get value out of the project beyond their salary (something that is quite standard for us as academics). One way I have tried to achieve this is by engaging in frank and open conversations with my own research coordinator about what she wants to gain through her involvement with this project. In response, she has emphasized skill development (quantitative data surveys, familiarity with new software such as SPSS), the acquisition of substantive knowledge (insight into debates around agronomy and GMOs) and co-production of outputs (co-presentations at academic conferences, co-publishing). This last point is particularly salient because she is a professional herself: one of the goals she set out at the beginning of this project was to increase her participation academic outputs. As such we have

worked hard to make sure that her contributions to this project extend beyond just data collection into analysis, results writing, and dissemination. Staying in one place makes it easier to overcome some of the potential hurdles such as power imbalances, communication, and expectations that color the relationship between the researcher and RAs, in order to create long-term collaborations that offer mutual benefit to both parties.

Research approaches that build on knowledge learned in the field can maintain an adaptive downward focus

In this section, Ed and Matthew reflect on incorporating a commitment to fieldwork and qualitative research methods amid changing professional and personal demands. They highlight the need to identify new and adapted methodological and organizational approaches to create continuity and ongoing relevance in field-based projects when extended time in the field is precluded by other responsibilities.

Ed

I cannot debate the changing access to the field that comes with an evolving life and career. When once I thought that a six-week field season was altogether too short, my current childcare and institutional realities lead me to relish the opportunity to spend three weeks in any one place. At the same time, I know that three weeks is simply not enough to build the sort of engagement and understanding that undergird qualitative explanation of events on the ground. My experience of seven field seasons of work, totaling some 20 months, in two communities in Ghana gave me insights into the ways that we talk about globalization, livelihoods, and development that have fueled my engagement with broad debates in development geography (Carr, 2011). These experiences culminated in a recent effort to rethink the entire idea of a livelihoods approach (Carr, 2013), to better align how we think about livelihoods with my extended experience of those livelihoods. Without that time on the ground, I doubt I would have had the insights that drove me to this rethinking. Recognizing the fact I will not, at least for some time, be able to conduct the same kind of long-duration fieldwork has forced me to think about how to implement this rethought livelihoods approach, so that others can use it while I cannot (Carr, 2014). This is critical, because I have a greater belief now, than at any time in my career, in the need for good qualitative fieldwork if we are to understand African agriculture in a meaningful way.

To meet the challenges of maintaining a downward orientation in ongoing research, I have worked to make my handicap into my ally, engaging new pathways of inquiry that I had the luxury to ignore while I was engaging in extended fieldwork. As my time in the field diminishes, my field seasons now look something like this: pre-fieldwork, I spend several weeks preparing materials that will be used to train fieldworkers in the overall philosophy and methods of qualitative research generally, and my particular approach to livelihoods analysis specifically. Upon arrival at the fieldwork site, I designate a week's worth of time to classroom/seminar discussions of these materials with fieldworkers. In this process, we collaborate to make decisions about what methods to use (focus groups, structured/semi-structured interviews, participant observation, etc.) and why, and what questions to ask. In drawing the field teams into this level of project design, they are better able to grasp the underlying goals of the research, and make contributions to the methodology that might facilitate achieving those goals. Once we have a set of agreed methods and tools (question lists for interviews, participatory activities, etc.), we field-test

the methodology, usually in multiple sites for several days to a week at each site. At the end of each field test, the team comes back together and discusses the methodology – what worked, what did not work, how the different members of the field team addressed aspects of the methodology, or tools that did not work – and works together to modify/redesign those aspects of the methodology found wanting. Thus, the last step of the research design is, at the same time, a capacity building exercise that facilitates the deep engagement of the field team with the goals of the research, trains them in how to critically evaluate their own methods and results as they go, and teaches them how to rethink their methods to address the shortcomings they identify along the way.

What is at stake, at least in my work, is threefold. The first is the shape of millions of dollars' worth of development programming, overviewed in the introduction to this paper, and aimed at agriculture in the context of a changing climate, which is nothing less than a battle against the 'inward and upward' tendencies described by Chambers (1997). Alongside the shaping of large amounts of development funding, the stakes associated with the place of qualitative research and data in development also include the long-term well-being of many with and for whom we work. When we do not understand what people are doing and why, we often misinterpret those behaviors. For example, farmers in Ghana's Central Region often plant crops in disaggregated plots, sometimes more than a kilometer apart (Carr, 2011). At first glance, this seems like a tremendously inefficient organization of the landscape that forces farmers to spend a lot of time moving between farm plots each day. Qualitative understandings of agricultural practice in this area, however, demonstrates that this disaggregation is a means of hedging agricultural production against seasonal precipitation that is highly variable in terms of amount and timing. While farmers lose some of their production each year as they hedge against excessive rainfall (by planting on the drier tops of hills) and inadequate precipitation (by planting on the bottoms between hills), they are protected against complete crop failure in seasons that bring extremes. Efforts to reorganize this agricultural system could make it more efficient, but at the same time they would likely make it less resilient unless some form of safety net was introduced to protect farmers from catastrophe in a similar manner. Understanding what development is changing is critical to ensuring that any changes are for the better, and not introducing new challenges.

The result of this pivot in my career is a much more serious focus on capacity-building than I might have taken on if I were still able to spend extended stretches in the field, and recognition that I did not emphasize this enough in my earlier work. This is the third issue at stake in my work, creating truly locally owned, and ideally locally generated, research into agricultural and other practices relevant to development and climate change programs. Our conversations about 'upward and inward' presume that the problems we seek to address will endure across entire careers (a rather dismal outlook, when you think about it) but more importantly that people like me, based in an institution in the Global North, will be *needed* indefinitely. Perhaps the only real end to this conversation is one where capacities improve such that we are no longer needed, where our participation becomes optional. If indeed the challenges we seek to address will endure, then this, to me, is what success will look like when I look back on my career.

Matthew

There are many advantages to conducting research in the same place over many years, and much has been written about the creation and execution of culturally appropriate, participatory methods in agricultural research. As Rocheleau (1994) reminds us, the best way

to design such a methodological program is to learn from experience: try something out, make mistakes, discuss these mistakes with informants and RAs, and revise accordingly. My current research investigating farmer attitudes and intentions to adopt Genetically Modified banana in Uganda has undergone more than a dozen different iterations (see Schnurr & Mujabi-Mujuzi, [forthcoming](#), for a detailed explanation): first my research coordinator and I went over the entire thing ensuring the wording was appropriate and accurate, before pilot testing it with over 20 farmers and then tweaking protocols based on farmer feedback and our own assessments. We made lots of mistakes. One concerned ranking exercises, where farmers are given numbers (1–15) and asked to rank the ecological constraints to banana production that are most important to them. I assumed that farmers would rank their preferences in ascending order (e.g. 1 is the most important, 15 is the least important), but we quickly realized that farmers ranked their preferences in descending order (e.g. 15 is the most important, 1 is the least important). Another tricky area has been designing proxies for economic wealth: we began by asking farmers how much they spend per week, assuming farmers would feel more comfortable sharing how much they spend rather than how much they earn. This worked quite well for some informants, but others spent so little per week that they preferred giving a value per month. Again, we adjusted the protocols accordingly. Over the 16 months that this project has been ongoing we have experimented with various other proxies for wealth including livestock owned, household electronics, and land size. The proxies for estimating wealth have changed more than 10 times since this research began.

Like Ed, I too have found that long-term fieldwork and place-specific research has become more challenging to undertake over time. As a graduate student, this model of research was relatively easy: I researched South African agriculture by spending years living in South Africa. One potential disadvantage of continuing on with agricultural research in a single African country over a long period of time relates to professional branding. Robertson (1985) argues that developing a deep regional (within the continent) knowledge helps to ward off the homogenizing effects of moving upward to a continent-wide expertise. After completing my doctoral research in South Africa, however, a number of mentors advised me to embark upon my next research project in a different country, so that I would be able to sell myself as an ‘Africanist’ on the academic job market. Their logic was as follows: most scholars of Africa appointed to positions at North American universities are one of only a handful of Africanists in the faculty (let alone the department). Teaching and supervision responsibilities will include most of the continent, so it’s important to be able to demonstrate geographical reach beyond a single country. While at the time I dismissed such suggestions as a bit far-fetched, I am now five years into my career and, reluctantly, acknowledge their legitimacy. I am teaching and supervising over a geographical range that is well beyond my personal expertise: I regularly examine case studies in class on West Africa, for instance, a part of the continent I have never had the chance to visit. Teaching a wide range of undergraduate and graduate courses forces me to draw on a breadth of geographical case studies and examples that might be easier to present if I had privileged breadth over depth in my own research program.

Changing conditions in the field require the incorporation of new knowledge into approaches to fieldwork

In addition to the challenge of navigating changes in personal and professional realities that affect how researchers engage with fieldwork, exceptional events beyond our

control often shape the process and substance of fieldwork. In this section, Kristal describes her experiences with making immediate decisions about leaving work in the field due to political instability, and the self-reflection prompted by quick and difficult decisions to move inward and upward, away from the field.

Kristal

Fieldwork and the deep experiential knowledge that results from it is compelling to me in part because long-term familiarity with a place has allowed me to move beyond my own immediate 'otherness,' both by building relationships that create a social role and by providing a material familiarity that allows me to move beyond practical and bodily concerns (Heasley, 2005; Okely, 2007). One important element of this familiarity is the ability to assess both general and more personally specific risks, and to make research and other decisions accordingly (Gokah, 2006). Awareness of personal safety and relative risk is a fairly constant element of fieldwork in my experience, but decisions based on that awareness are often minor and occur within the overall flow of research and time in the field. The decision to fundamentally alter or call off research based on an unexpected event or new potential threats has proved challenging and at times gut-wrenching for me, in part because of the understanding I thought I had of my own place in the field.

I was conducting fieldwork in Mali in March 2012 when a military coup occurred. I was on the outskirts of Bamako at a research station when all foreign staff received text messages from their respective embassies warning of possible instability and violence. The first round of decision-making, to get to the airport before town shut down in chaos and to buy an on-the-spot seat in the only plane leaving that night, happened so fast there was little time to reflect. At the same time, it felt like an excruciating admittance of many small, often ignored details about a Westerner doing fieldwork in Africa. On the one hand, I wanted to get out if at all possible, given the uncertain nature of what was happening and how it could all play out in coming days and weeks. On the other hand, what did that say of my commitment to Mali and West Africa, that at the first sign of real danger or crisis I wanted to leave? More immediately, the fact that I both wanted and had the ability to pull out a credit card and buy a plane ticket out was a stark reminder of the difference between long-term commitment to work in and care for a place, and actually being from that place.

This divide is of course always present when doing fieldwork – we might spend weeks or months in villages, eat local food, dress appropriately, learn local languages, and even assume identities that approximate localness. However, we can and do drop those identities at some point to return home, and we can choose when and how that happens. From the point of view of some sociological theory (e.g. Berger & Luckmann, 1967), this description of the social construction of identity and reality is a part of all human interaction, and is perhaps not so exceptional. However, in the context of fieldwork in sub-Saharan Africa, the differences between there and here are stark, and, perhaps because they are so material, they are at times unsettling and difficult for me to reconcile. Making the decision to leave Mali in a moment of crisis was an encapsulation of this ongoing unease, which stems from the contrast between a feeling of genuine commitment to being there, and the begrudging acknowledgment that I am different and 'privileged,' and perhaps an interloper in others' realities. For me, a moment of crisis and immediate thoughts about safety brought up underlying ethical concerns I have about committing to long-term relationships through fieldwork, while recognizing that I

am also maintaining distance and have the ability to leave or end the relationships whenever I choose.

In the aftermath of the coup in Mali, there have been many rounds of discussion amongst colleagues about how to continue research given new security concerns and uncertainties, if and when research (particularly longitudinal data collection) is less important than personal safety, and how to make those decisions both for ourselves and with our collaborators. This last point is particularly challenging, I think, as everyone will have their own threshold for what they are willing to risk in the name of research. I was planning to spend spring 2013 in Mali and Niger to do another round of data collection for an ongoing project, and after several months of news watching and soliciting all possible opinions, made the decision that I did not feel safe doing fieldwork alone in remote rural areas. This decision was met with varying degrees of agreement (or not) by my colleagues and collaborators, with some expressing almost disgust that I would let ‘sensationalistic’ media reports and the random, admittedly small possibility of kidnapping stand in the way of research commitments and good data. Working through my own priorities in these decisions included separating out my feelings about commitment to West Africa and the possibility that a place to which I feel connected might have changed in ways that I don’t yet understand, a desire to do rigorous (so as to be meaningful) research, and my own feelings about privilege and mobility.

Discussion

The above examples and reflections on the role of fieldwork in maintaining grounded research agendas offer an additional layer of critical analysis and nuance to Chambers’ (1997) assertion that professional advancement and changing personal circumstances inevitably push researchers in the realm of international development inward and upward on the scales of ideological and political power. For many of us, and others who have written for this journal, Chambers’ positive ideal-type reflects our trajectories in the field: starting out as Peace Corps volunteers (as two of us were) or PhD students conducting dissertation research (as all four of us did), we tend to spend less and less time on fieldwork as our careers and personal lives progress (see also Newhouse, 2012; Pearson & Paige, 2012). But such outcomes are neither linear nor deterministic. We believe it is possible to develop a fieldwork ethic that remains committed to outward and downward research despite these challenges: one based on humility, gratefulness, collaboration, and generosity. Make no mistake: this paper was generated not by back-patting ourselves for maintaining this commitment. Rather, it emerged from recognition that while many complicating and legitimate life factors can challenge our ability to meet Chambers’ positive ideal-type, researchers can also approach these changes as opportunities to create new models for agricultural research that maintain a commitment to outward and downward research.

Our experiences related to adapting to the ambiguities of integrating a fieldwork ethic into complex professional and personal demands suggest that there are many pragmatic approaches to fieldwork and place-based research that generate meaningful information and experiences that continue to inform the research processes. We believe that the ideal-types described by Chambers (1997) are useful as bookends to a spectrum of approaches and positions within the field of research for development, but that these ideal-types should not be reified to the exclusion of innovative ways of resisting such pulls via a fieldwork ethic. In Figure 1, we suggest a messier, more realistic typology that depicts the practical combinations of decision-making and approaches to research

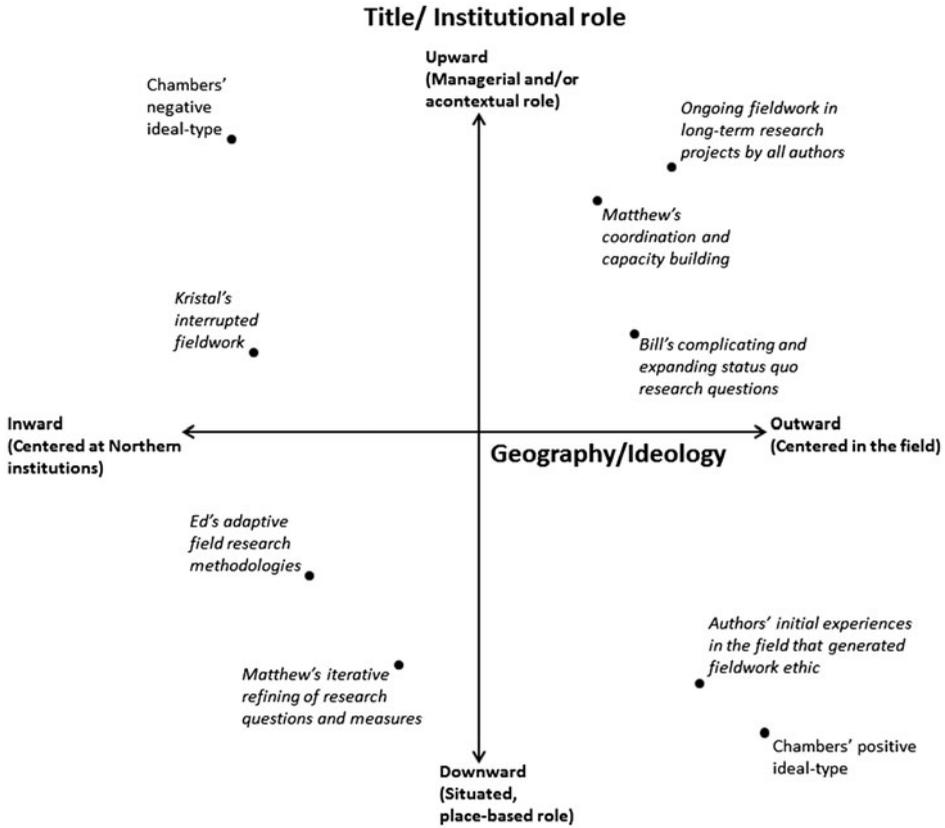


Figure 1. Elements and examples of adaptive fieldwork in agricultural research for development.

for development that are described in this paper. We situate aspects of each author's narrative within a dynamic and temporally adaptive view of Chambers' two spectra of inward-outward and upward-downward.

In our view, ethical fieldwork begins with the conviction that no single person in the research process has all of the answers, or all of the questions – an acknowledgment that is particularly salient within agricultural research in sub-Saharan Africa, where agricultural and social systems are highly diverse and complex (Richards, 1989). Figure 1 demonstrates both the complex nature of research conducted in and about the field, and also the partiality of any single research approach or step of a research project. Bill's description of how fieldwork and expert status allows him to include voices and knowledges not necessarily privileged by either development discourse or local elites complicates the negative connotations associated with moving away from the field due to changes in title or rank. The status and financial means that come with an academic appointment at a North American university can provide the resources needed to ask more nuanced questions in the field than would be otherwise possible. Similarly, Matthew's example of capacity building among local RAs and managers describes an upward shift in his role in the field. But by engaging in a long-term research project and ongoing fieldwork, the research process has remained focused on the needs and realities of the field site, as evident in his later description of evolving metrics, methods and analysis.

Conducting research on agriculture, rural livelihoods, and agrarian change in sub-Saharan Africa is different than implementing development projects addressing needs in the same substantive and geographic areas. Most of us have worked as field-based development professionals, and sought out scholarly research as a means of retaining a downward-oriented role in the research-for-development process (Moseley, 2007a). Interestingly, however, this inward shift has created space and time for conducting primary fieldwork and developing adaptive research methodologies and analytical concepts that reflect the on-the-ground realities of rural agricultural communities. Ed's example of conducting primary fieldwork that is place-specific continues to guide his theoretical and academic work. It also suggests that the critical thinking and support for primary research fostered in university contexts can create opportunities for researchers to continue to engage in long-term research that generates outputs that are meaningful for both the local context and the (inward-looking) academic realm. The collaborative, iterative process described by Matthew of exploring and refining research questions and indicators of change reflects a critical and situated epistemological approach to research reflects a continued downward orientation of a researcher's role in the field, despite being conducted largely from afar.

Finally, Kristal's example of fieldwork interrupted challenges Chambers' (1997) insinuation that moving upward and inward is invariably done by volition or with insensitive intent. The ambivalent feelings that accompany all moves into and away from the field are brought into high relief during moments of insecurity and uncertainty. Sometimes circumstances beyond our control force a researcher away from the field. These changing roles can happen in moments of crisis, as Kristal's narrative recounts, or in response to professional and personal circumstances that change more slowly. Either way, the original downward and outward orientation that many researchers appreciated and adopted during initial long stints in the field can persist through careful and committed reflexivity and relationships.

Conclusion

The examples provided in this paper describe how each of us has navigated changing professional, personal, and contextual realities that have pushed us 'away' from the field. We see these challenges as inherent in all fieldwork decisions, including the decision to go in the field in the first place, and to repeatedly return. Self-reflexivity is a crucial counterpart to qualitative research methods (Naples, 2003), and all of the authors here turn a critical lens on their own commitments to fieldwork to better understand the strengths, challenges, and potential contradictions of being a North American researcher engaged in long-term research in Africa. Wrestling with such sticky and sensitive issues allows us to learn from and support each other, and reminds us that we need to be vigilant in working towards a more inclusive and realistic understanding of the fieldwork process, as well as its impacts and limitations. Being explicit about the trade-offs that exist within the decisions we make as researchers creates a more humble and honest assessment of our own struggles to retain a commitment to fieldwork and applied research amidst changing professional and personal circumstances. We offer these personal experiences and reflections in the hope that they might be useful for others as they encounter the challenges associated with research into agricultural development in Africa.

Notes on contributors

Kristal Jones is a postdoctoral researcher in the Office of International Programs, College of Agricultural Sciences at Penn State. She is a rural sociologist with research interests in seed systems, the social impacts of agricultural research for development, and the political ecology of agricultural science. Her work is focused on Francophone West Africa.

Matthew Schnurr is an associate professor in the Department of International Development Studies at Dalhousie University. He is an environmental geographer with research and teaching interests in environment and development, political ecology, agricultural biotechnology, farmer decision-making, and environmental justice. His work focuses primarily on eastern and southern Africa.

Edward R. Carr is an associate professor in the Department of Geography at the University of South Carolina. His interests lie broadly in the challenges of development and global change. He directs the Humanitarian Response and Development Lab (HURDL) at USC, which bridge the worlds of research and implementation in various manifestations of these broad challenges.

William G. Moseley is a full professor and department chair in the Department of Geography at Macalester College. His research interests include political ecology, tropical agriculture, environment and development policy, and livelihood security. Most of his fieldwork has been undertaken in West and Southern Africa.

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