

# We wonder where fieldwork begins and ends



If you asked a researcher when their fieldwork began, it is very likely that you will not get a singular answer. For some, it will be the day their ethics application was approved, for others, the first interview, field visit or lab experiment, the first email to approach a participant, when they started reflecting on their research design, or, even, when they settled on a research topic. To complicate things further, some might find that their entanglements with the ‘field’ pre-date the research entirely – whether that is defined through place, time period, communities or experiences. Similarly, the ‘conclusion’ of fieldwork is a fraught notion. For many, their engagements with the field, the communities they worked with, the place attachments they formed, carry on far longer than the period of ‘data collection’.

While university frameworks ask us to treat fieldwork as linear, finite, bounded and separate from the researcher, in reality, our ways of knowing are influenced by myriad experiences, beyond academic training and procedures. Our **emotions** often even dictate what we choose to study in the first place, bringing the ‘field’ into the fold of our affective world. Consequently, maybe fieldwork does not simply begin when we ‘enter the field’ (the geography we set out to study), nor does it end when we leave it. Furthermore, it is worth noting that such entanglements with the embodied **temporality** of fieldwork, and **place/subject attachments**, not only bring into question ‘where and when the field begins or ends’, but also how fieldwork changes us and the research. This asynchronous temporality between periods of ‘research’ and ‘fieldwork’ can also be a source of strength for the researcher, often leading to further research or aid in lateral thinking. With the shift to focus on digitally-mediated communities and fields, more questions arise on the materiality of fieldwork and the implications for good research practice.

We began this wonderment as an open-ended inquiry, a collective rethinking, but over the course of the Research Methods Rendezvous (RMR) it evolved into a collective resistance to the regimentation of our ‘fields’ and our experience of doing research. For the second session of

the Research Methods Rendezvous, we convened a Kitchen Table to discuss an alternative paradigm for fieldwork that reflects the complexities on the ground. Despite coming together as a group of researchers from different disciplinary backgrounds, we shared an understanding of the messiness of trying to define fieldwork within institutional dogmas and procedures. It was apparent from our discussions that there is a broader sense of dissatisfaction from the way fieldwork research is currently governed within academia, what is validated as 'data', and how often this process also comes at the cost of refusing our own selves or creating distance from the 'field' to mitigate bias.

Some of the broad themes that emerged from the RMR Session 2 (Kitchen Table) are as follows:

1. **Positionality and Identity**  
(encompassing insider/outsider status, place-based identity, lived experience, embodied knowledge)
2. **Ethics and Institutional Constraints**  
(encompassing bias, existing academic paradigms, cultural interpretations, and the pressures of institutional frameworks).
3. **Temporality and Research Journeys**  
(encompassing challenges, trauma from the field, time boundaries)
4. **Methods and Tools**  
(encompassing research skills and training)

The most common reflection – and often an entry point into the discussion – across the participants was concerned with the layers of our professional identities and how constraints for academic writing had asked us to leave some of them at the door in our doctoral journeys. For some, those professional identities and experiences were the very reason they had embarked on a specific research project, yet, if lucky, they were confined to a positionality statement, or at best seen as anecdotal evidence – not empirically relevant.

In practice, however, most of us constantly break these artificial boundaries. In our discussion, we talked about how these lived experiences meant that “you can’t unsee what you already know”, as one of us said. Previous encounters with the field are part of what you bring into the ‘fieldwork’. Someone described this separation as having “dual identities” and not being able to write as a “whole persona”. While we recognise that researcher positionality helps us to think

critically about bias, assumptions, and privileged perspectives, in our discussion we wondered if the matter is more complex than current institutional practices and frameworks push us to think. Some colleagues also pointed out how place-based identities often shape our ways of seeing the world, and thus, as researchers, our epistemologies.

Issues of positionality, identity and bias also play into etic-emic (outsider-insider) perspectives in research. While building rapport with participants, gauging and interpreting language, behaviour, lived/oral histories, or social/place cues, most researchers are highly aware of their positionality as a researcher. As such, often maintaining strict boundaries between our felt and embodied experience of the field and constantly attempting to mitigate 'bias' is neither tenable nor – as some of us argued – productive. For instance, colleagues from public health research shared how the field is often defined by people who have no idea what the field is, who have no lived experience of particular medical or health conditions (being studied). Such alienation from the field and gatekeeping of 'what counts as data' also runs the risk of discounting valuable real-world knowledge.

Finally, the purpose of this blog post and our intervention in this space is merely to interrogate our collective understanding of fieldwork and to create an avenue for further questions, experiences, and insights. Therefore, we ask the reader to follow and engage with the ongoing conversation around this topic on our [live Padlet](#). We also urge you to add to the growing reading/resource list.

## Note

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Our participation in the Research Methods Rendezvous stemmed from ongoing discussions on the positionality of place-based researchers across academic disciplines within the [AHRC Early Career Place Network](#), which is hosted by the University of Glasgow, and Lucrezia convenes in her capacity as Research Associate.

This blog has been shared with all the contributors from our Kitchen Table to ensure it reflects the richness and nuances of our conversation. We’d like to thank all of them for their enthusiasm and intellectual generosity.