

Research note

The Life-Changing Magic: Fieldwork in Japan

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Summary

What is “fieldwork”? What is “successful” fieldwork? What does it mean to do fieldwork in Japanese society? While fieldwork has become established as one of the major research methods, it has also been taken for granted. Although all fieldworkers encounter unexpected challenges as well as gratifications in the field, there is little discussion about what fieldwork actually entails. This paper aims to demystify this experience by introducing the concept of fieldwork, briefly looking at its history, and by analyzing the particular importance of doing fieldwork in Japan. Drawing on my own multi-sited research about the changing dominant ideologies and the impact of corporate restructuring on Japanese workers, the paper discusses challenges and outcomes of each field site. I argue that the time and effort one puts into one’s fieldwork will directly impact the subsequent stages of one’s research, analysis, and writings — namely, the process of anthropological knowledge production. Moreover, the deeper one’s engagement with informants’ lifeworlds is, the richer one’s results will be. Thus, fieldwork in Japan entails becoming part of the cosmology of one’s informants, and as such it is a long-term endeavor that can lead to long-lasting and life-changing engagements for the researcher and one’s informants that may shape one’s personal and professional life for years to come.

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