

## 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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## Fieldwork: A Definition

Fieldwork is, by definition, “working in the field.” Fieldwork thus implies the importance of being “on the ground” in the respective field site and conducting sustained research. Also known as the “ethnographic method,” fieldwork refers to total concentration on experiences and observations in a particular research site over an extended period of time. Before the advent of high-speed travel and the internet, fieldwork usually implied being completely separated from one’s ordinary life and total immersion in a new social environment for periods of several months to several years (Shokeid 2015).

Fieldwork in the anthropological sense consists of “participant observation.” The core of fieldwork is its function of “contextualization” and “binding.” It *contextualizes* the structure/system and the daily routines, as well as one’s informants and the delicate human relationships and dynamics of power in the field. Fieldwork can also *bind* the researcher to one’s informants and the space. This can be done through “real” participation by working on the ground, immersing oneself fully in participating just as one’s informants do (e.g. Roberson 1998; Roberts 1994; Rohlen 1974; Roth 2002), or being in situations where real participation is not possible (e.g. Bestor 2004; Raz 1999). This can be conducted through what Theodore Bestor (2003) variously calls “inquisitive observation” — “self-consciously work[ing] on a technique for gaining access to people”; “parachuting” — “dropping into the midst of things from multiple entry points (2003: 319)”; and, “engaging in [...] unstructured interviews” (2003: 320). Crucially, such active participation is invaluable for anthropologists to offer grounded knowledge for contextualizing and cross-checking other research methodologies such as surveys, formal interviews, and archival research, as well as to reveal new avenues of research (Bestor 2003: 333).

While we seldom discuss the details of fieldwork, or now rarely justify using this method, in the past many of our predecessors devoted considerable time to discussing these issues. In this sense, it is instructive to revisit how fieldwork emerged as necessary, and to see how fieldwork has become the authoritative methodology for anthropological knowledge production (Shokeid 2015; Stocking 2001). Moreover, as our societies have become increasingly globalized, the concept and practices of fieldwork have also expanded and become multifaceted in contemporary field research.

## The Origins of Fieldwork: From Armchair Researchers to Fieldworkers

Unlike the assumption that fieldwork is a relatively modern invention by Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942), even so-called classical anthropologists such as Edward Burnet Tylor (1832–1917) were concerned about their methods of conducting research — as they were aware that the ways in which they collect data can affect

the kinds they receive from the field. Following his predecessor, Lewis Henry Morgan (1818–1881), Tylor never really did ethnographic fieldwork. However, Tylor was always concerned with the improvement of collecting ethnographic information and highlighted “the importance of staying long enough in one place to appreciate it from the point of view of the people themselves” (Stocking 2001: 112). To this end, he spearheaded the creation of one of the foundational “handbooks” for ethnographic fieldwork: “Notes and Queries in Anthropology” (BAAS 1874).

These early anthropologists called into question the lack of empirical data within the contemporary evolutionary frameworks, and recognized the need to rely on “ethnographic data” rather than on “non-professional sources” (Garbarino 1977). In the late nineteenth century, there was a fixed division of scholarly labor — “a ‘chain of subordination’ between metropolitan core theorists and their ‘data’ in the field” (Kelly 2004a: n.d.). This was the case with the Victorian anthropologists such as Tylor’s student James Frazer (1854–1941), and his own student William Baldwin Spencer (1860–1929).

Frazer encouraged Spencer to pursue anthropological inquiry on Australian Aborigines by collaborating with the local white man, Frank J. Gillen (Stocking 1995: 93), because he found it “necessary to put one’s self into the mental attitude of the native, and then the matter is capable of being more or less explained and understood” (Spencer and Gillen 1899: 48). He argued that: “To understand the native it is simply essential to lay aside all ideas of relationship as counted amongst ourselves” (Spencer and Gillen 1899: 58). Spencer’s influence was tremendous, especially on William Rivers (1864–1922) — who came to anthropology with a “commitment to methodological rigor” and “openness to embrave explanatory hypotheses” (Stocking 2001: 338). In 1898, Rivers joined the Torres Straits Expedition (along with Alfred Haddon, and Charles Seligman) in order to collect data from Australia and New Guinea (Eriksen and Nielson 2001). This collective effort brought together various scholars with different training, producing an impressive volume of high-quality data. As a result, Rivers, Haddon, and Seligman are often perceived as “the first true fieldworkers” in British social anthropology (Eriksen and Nielson 2001: 26). For Rivers, intensive fieldwork meant living for more than a year in a community, getting to know every member personally, and studying every feature of the vernacular. It was only through such a method that “one can realize the immense extent of the knowledge” and “discover the incomplete and even misleading character” (1912: 7) of survey work — which had previously provided anthropological data.

After participating in several ethnographic expeditions to northern and western Canada, the German anthropologist Franz Boas (1858–1942) took up a position at Columbia University. When he began his ethnographic work in the late nineteenth century, “anthropology had neither a solid base of data nor a scientific theoretical approach” (Buckser 1997: 43, cited in Kelly 2004b). Boas argued that evolutionist theories were *invalid* and *ahistorical*, and he fought to replace the common practice

of relying on travelers' accounts and missionary reports "with reliable information and careful theorizing" (Buckser 1997: 43, cited in Kelly 2004b). For Boas (1920), anthropology — as "a science of man" — necessitated a *dynamic, holistic, and affective* understanding, which requires one to grasp the relationship between the object of study and its "surroundings." With his rigor in understanding societies *holistically and epistemologically*, Boas challenged many Eurocentric theorizations and shaped American anthropology in the early twentieth century (Stocking 1995, 2001; Smedley 1993).

Boas' influence on American anthropology notwithstanding, it was Malinowski who solidified the concept of intensive fieldwork (as opposed to survey work) in Europe. While often treated, as the father of fieldwork, Malinowski was in fact influenced by Spencer and Gillen's (1899) ideas of living among local populations for long periods of time and understanding their language, and by Rivers' (1912) method of "intensive work" in relation to "survey work." When Malinowski first embarked on fieldwork, he brought Rivers' work along as his "methodological tool kit" (Stocking 2001: 341). Malinowski recalled:

The work done "while living quite alone among the natives" was "incomparably more intensive than work done from white men's settlements, or even in any white man's company": my experience is that direct questioning of the natives about a custom or belief never discloses their attitude of mind as thoroughly as the discussion of facts connected with the direct observation of a custom or a concrete occurrence. (1922: 7–8, cited in Stocking 1995: 252)

Moreover, having realized the limitations of the empirical data and ethnographic grounding in the previous anthropological literature, Malinowski (1922: 17) hoped to revolutionize anthropology and make it more scientific through reifying its methods and analysis. For Malinowski, the need for scientific inquiry called for scientific methods, and the best method for anthropology was fieldwork. He explained that fieldwork "ought to be presented in a manner absolutely candid and above board," and must give "a detailed account of all the arrangements of the experiments" and "an exact description of the apparatus used," as well as precise descriptions of "the length of time devoted to them," and "the degree of approximation with which each measurement was made." (Malinowski 1922: 2).

To summarize, in order to develop a sound scientific method in the face of unreliable sources and biased theorizations, our predecessors highlighted the importance of doing fieldwork by developing the concept of participant observation — the methodology of living with the people one studied, and learning to participate as far as possible in their daily lives and activities. It was essential to stay long enough in the field to become thoroughly acquainted with the local way of life, to record the details of everyday, ordinary life, and to be able to use the local vernacular in order to access the local meanings and perceptions of sociocultural phenomena. These practices became the foundational methods as well as the basis of knowledge

production in modern social anthropology (Stocking 1983, 1995, 2001; Clifford 1988).

## The Practice of Fieldwork: Selecting and Accessing Field Sites

Having understood the stakes involved in fieldwork as a methodology, I will now discuss how to put fieldwork into practice. Through fieldwork, one can learn not only the structure/system of one's research site and the daily routines of the space in question, but also the delicate human relationships/networks and the dynamics of power within it. Thus, crucial to conducting good fieldwork is identifying what kind of site is relevant for examining the research questions that one is aiming to answer. These days, doing fieldwork includes: "making contacts" and "gaining access to a fieldwork site"; "navigating bureaucratic institutions"; "surveying and interviewing"; collecting "statistical and archival data"; and, "building and maintaining networks over time and among different research sites and cultural groups" (Bestor et al. 2003: 10).

Field sites can include municipal communities like villages, towns, neighborhoods, or city districts; institutions like companies, shops, bureaucratic entities, religious groups, political associations, or nongovernmental/nonprofit organizations (NGOs, NPOs); small communities like volunteer associations, hobby circles, interest groups, fan clubs, or subcultures; minority groups like ethnic minority or LGBTQ movements; and, hobby/interest spaces like sports and leisure facilities. Each field site has unique peculiarities and different challenges. Also, as field sites have changed as the disciplines of Japanese Studies and Anthropology have evolved (Hendry 2003; Smith 2003), field sites now extend to include "transnational" and "virtual" communities — such as online forums, support groups, and social media circles (e.g. Meyer-Ohle 2009). An important characteristic of field sites today is that they are no longer assumed to be static, but rather are variously described as "*delocalized, multisited, postcommunity, transnational spaces, and polymorphous engagements*" (Shokeid 2015: 151, italics in the original).

In pursuing fieldwork, scholars have expressed the importance of "serendipity" as well as well-thought out plans; thus *flexibility* in the field is very important. And no field encounter is a waste. In the course of fieldwork, one's research questions may guide a researcher to do research across multiple field sites. Just as informants are not confined to one space or one institution, researchers have adapted fieldwork techniques by pursuing comparative research across different groups or spaces (comparative fieldwork), or by following informants as their lives crisscross through multiple sites (multi-sited fieldwork).

In my own research, so as to analyze the changing dominant ideologies and the impact of corporate restructuring on Japanese workers I chose to conduct my fieldwork in three different spaces: corporations, after-work leisure spaces, and the weekend space of hobby activities. I chose these venues in order to fill the gaps in the previous works that had examined exclusively either corporate or leisure spheres.

This way, while it was time-consuming and labor-intensive, I was able to understand individual employees more holistically as they moved through different contexts and crafted themselves by navigating through varying spheres and ideologies (Gagné 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019).

Moreover, it is hard to understand sensitive corporate tensions and office politics — as well as personal desires and life experiences — only through corporate contexts (for example by just working in the office with the individuals in question). This was especially true toward the end of the first decade of the new century, as many corporations had implemented various forms of restructuring during the long economic recession, which made workplace relations tenser. Resonating with Glenda Roberts' (1994) fieldwork experiences with female factory workers and Joshua Roth's (2003) research on Brazilian Nikkei migrant workers, in which they pursued intense participant observation as workers themselves, I was also challenged by the actual limited time available for interacting with informants when at work. Instead, lunch breaks as well as after-work or non-work contexts became indispensable to understand the office politics and institutional marginalization that occurred within the corporations that I studied.

At the same time, if I focused only on leisure spaces of after-work or weekend activities I would miss the larger contexts behind individuals' leisure participation and desires — as work and leisure co-construct each other for many of my informants. In addition, because I was doing fieldwork by working at companies in the afternoons, the “second shift” of fieldwork in after-work leisure spaces was physically and mentally demanding. At the same time, as spaces like hostess clubs are part of the “leisure of business” for many employees, sometimes I was able to catch a glimpse of men's “inner reality” and learn about sensitive topics in these after-work spaces. In these ways, by triangulating the multiple dimensions of my informants' lives across various spheres, I was able to grasp more fully the complex — and fluid — subjectivities of my informants.

While fieldwork is time-consuming and researchers often face the issue of finding time to reflect on their experiences and write up their observations, in retrospect many of us realize the value of our diverse field encounters — and the unexpected incidents. When I was doing fieldwork at a major company, Corporation A, I became worried because the division I was in was going through restructuring and it was eventually closed down after nine months. At the same time, I was able to experience the visible structural marginalization that took place subtly and gradually. Moreover, through my fieldwork in after-work and weekend leisure activities, I was able to get to know various kinds of informant who were not corporate employees — including independent professionals and a member of the *yakuza*, Japan's organized crime network. At that time, in the thick of my fieldwork, I was overwhelmed by the number of different people I met across my various field sites. In retrospect, it was instructive to learn about corporate employees by understanding how noncorporate

individuals were different from them. So in this sense, I found that every experience is useful.

In addition, as many scholars have warned, informants use different contexts to express the various sides of their selves, and the power of shifting social contexts can influence the manner in which they present themselves to others.<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, the venues that I chose and the ways in which I conducted fieldwork greatly influenced the kind of data I collected. In preparing for fieldwork, it is important to spend time thinking carefully about what kind of fieldwork is necessary to pursue one's research questions and subjects, and to ask academic advisers or colleagues if there are any missing angles or perspectives in the proposed fieldwork plan.

The next important step is to negotiate access to the field site, often by explaining the research to a "gatekeeper" or key informant — the key contact who can grant the researcher access. This depends greatly on the kind of field site that one is aiming to research. If it is a well-organized institution, then official permission is of key importance — and often requires contacting someone high in the organization who has the authority to approve the researcher's access. Many organizations, especially companies and religious groups, are very careful about protecting confidential information, and thus access can be very difficult to obtain. If a researcher has a contact in the organization already, it can make access much easier; if not, then it is important to be prepared to answer many questions about one's background and research agenda. In some cases, corporate secrecy and regulations means that fieldwork may be impossible, as with the institutional challenges that Aviad Raz (1999: 21–23) faced in his quest to access the "backstage" of Tokyo Disneyland.

The ways in which a researcher gains access will also affect the research findings. For example, if the primary gatekeeper is an organizational leader (like someone in management in a company, or a high-level leader in a religious group), then this can give the researcher access to official documents and management perspectives — but it may also limit one's access to candid voices among nonmanagement. Being perceived of as "a guest of the leadership" may cause ordinary members to become more cautious around the researcher, as they fear that he/she may side with the views of the leadership (Hardacre 2003). Again, flexibility in judging the situations and acting accordingly is necessary.

While NGOs and NPOs are rather open to academic research and may have less resistance to outsiders, sometimes they have no or only loosely defined physical sites, or fluid relationships between members. Others can be ideologically charged, which might undermine the fieldworker's aim of understanding the situation and its power relations holistically. With less institutionalized organizations, such as hobby groups or leisure spaces, access can be more open from the bottom up — through meeting people in the space and expanding one's network by having them introduce

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1 See, for example, the famous account of "crafting selves" in Dorinne Kondo (1999), as well as the discussion of the sociocentric sense of self in Takie Lebra (2004).

you to other participants. At the same time, such spaces may give a partial and often opposing picture of participants in their nonleisure spaces — their everyday life and work.

In terms of internet-based research, access is much easier but can involve certain ethical challenges. When using online forums, it is important to contact the moderator to explain the researcher's presence; when reaching out to individuals through social media, it is also ethically necessary to be upfront about one's research and objectives. Also, due to the common practice of anonymization in the digital sphere, informants may exaggerate or act in unrealistic ways that do not reflect their actual life or behaviors. In other words, if at all possible, meeting people in person provides unparalleled information, as this might reveal the slippage between what they write on social media and what they say in person — hence the necessity of doing work in the field. In any case, preparing some documents to explain one's research and its reasoning is important, and ethical fieldwork requires that the researcher fully clarify the research project and its goals early on to those who will be involved in the field.

In my own research, getting into corporate sites was the most difficult part. Initially, I was introduced by a Keidanren (Japan Business Federation) connection or by local university professors, but no companies were interested in having a researcher inside their walls — especially during this period of restructuring. Thus, I ended up using a bottom-up approach. I became a volunteer assistant for Company A, while I was introduced to Company B and Company C through informants I had gotten to know. For the after-work leisure spaces, I was introduced to different types of hostess club (private drinking establishments where female hostesses offer customers drinks and conversation) by my corporate informants who use such spaces for after-hours entertainment and corporate sociality. While the Mama-san, the heads of these clubs, were skeptical about my request to do fieldwork, after submitting my research proposal and explaining my reasons they accepted having me there. At the same time, participant observation involved working with the Mama-san, corporate clients, as well as hostesses, and getting accepted by fellow hostesses was a completely different matter. At hostess clubs where I was introduced as a researcher, many hostesses did not think of me favorably and developing good relationships with hostesses as coworkers was challenging. However, it was long-term participant observation at the same site that enabled me to be accepted. We shared late nights together, helping each other through entertaining customers when they felt sick and overly drunk; other times we got harshly scolded by the Mama-san. Altogether, this gradual bonding helped to shrink the distance between us.

In order to further my understanding of corporate employees, I chose to follow them through their weekend hobby and volunteer activities as well. I was introduced by corporate informants who were participants in those activities, and so access was relatively easier. At the same time, because of their loose structure, full participation was a must. In addition, in such spaces participants deliberately avoid talking about

nonleisure issues — namely business matters, such as corporate affiliation and their occupations — because these topics were seen as differentiating participants and thus as taboo topics related to the “opposing” corporate space. This also makes it clear how each space has benefits and limits as a field site, and how it is important for a researcher to be aware of them.

Finally, another strength of fieldwork is to familiarize oneself with the fieldsite and with informants, which can refine one’s knowledge and understanding about what is most important to one’s informants. Some of the information can be elicited from interviews, but seeing them in action in particular spaces or networks offers deep insights and holistic understanding. Also, “good” fieldwork can lead to fruitful interviews in later stages, as individuals become familiar with the researcher as a person in the same field and networks. In my field study of hostess clubs, for the first four months I was wrestling with the question of male to female inter-gender tensions and gendered consumption. However, after my long-term involvement, I came to realize what issues were really important for participants: for men, the hostess club is a space of fantasy and suspension from corporate strictures; for women, taking precedence were the intra-gender tensions and power dynamics among hostesses, for whom the club was fundamentally a workplace (Gagné 2010; see also, Gagné 2016). In this way, oftentimes informants in the field will teach the researcher what is at stake through their actions (as opposed to in interviews). In this sense, fieldwork is not just about knowledge production, but it also can redirect and rewrite our research questions and agenda in the field.

## Maintaining Relationships

Bestor (2003) highlights the importance of cultivating and expanding “networks”. Therefore, it is important to immerse oneself in networks and in human relations consciously and continuously, which can also speak to post-fieldwork relationships. This leads to the important question and challenge: How can we maintain relationships with informants? And, why is this particularly important for those who research Japanese society?

Many fieldworkers have emphasized the importance of visiting sites after long-term fieldwork to follow-up with subsequent changes. This helps researchers to: 1) correct their early misconceptions; 2) deepen their understanding; and, 3) identify continuities and changes over time (Bestor et al. 2003: 16). For example, Roger Goodman’s (2003: 184) long-term research reveals how the once-problematized concept of *kikokushijo* (“returnee Japanese children”) underwent a dramatic transformation between the 1960s and the 1980s, and these individuals even became appreciated as an “international elite” due to the larger socioeconomic changes of globalization in Japan.

I also found it very important to visit my field sites in the years after, as I could see first-hand the long-term effects of corporate restructuring. In addition, some of my informants’ lives and worldviews greatly changed after the 3.11 disaster (the March

11, 2011 earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster), as well as being directly affected by corporate downsizing and family medical problems. While certain issues are more susceptible to change, such as migrant or youth problems (Goodman 2003), Japan's susceptibility to natural disasters as well as being an information society with various cultural rhetoric and technological developments means that many research topics on Japan are susceptible to rapid changes. Therefore, it is important for researchers to be aware of this and follow up with their field sites and informants in order to avoid being trapped in synchronic and essentialist theorizations.

Finally, while essentialism is certainly a caveat, there *is* something particular about doing fieldwork in Japan. Several scholars have demonstrated the importance of "maintaining good relations in the long term" and the practice of "gift-giving" (Hardacre 2003: 85). While this is true for fieldwork everywhere else too, Hardacre (2003: 85) calls this one of "the obligations" of doing fieldwork in Japan. Gift-giving is also a marked feature of doing fieldwork not only for anthropologists, but also for historians and religious studies scholars. Relatedly, having a third person introduce one to a field site can help open doors for one's research. However, it is important to note that this involves gratitude as well as obligation, as "such introductions involve the standard Japanese cultural practice of *borrowing trust from other people*" (Bestor et al. 2003: 14, italics added for emphasis). Thus, researchers should be aware of how their behavior in the field affects both the researcher's relationships with their informants as well as impacts on the person who made the initial introduction.

To understand the importance of reciprocal exchanges and reflexive relations, as well as the complexity and ambivalence of such exchanges among Japanese people themselves, Katherine Rupp's (2003) work provides valuable insight into how relations within Japanese society are developed and maintained. What undergirds gift-giving practices in Japan is the strength of relationships, gratitude, and hierarchy (2003: 50), and these actions are the "material embodiment of a social and cosmic order" (2003: 197). Thus, gift-giving is not a practice conducted on a purely ad hoc and case-by-case basis. For instance, according to Rupp, through gift-giving a receiver can discern the depth/commitment of one's relationship with a giver (in terms of "deep" and "shallow" relationships) by understanding how much time and monetary value one puts into a gift and the "giver's perception of the strength of relationship that exists between giver and receiver" (2003: 35). Moreover, while many Japanese people have mixed feelings about the practices of gift-giving as it entails devoting a lot of time, money, and effort, the majority of people nevertheless still engage in it. This is because such a practice is inescapably tied to the larger processes that influence people both directly and indirectly. Thus Rupp pushes us to acknowledge that interpersonal exchanges create and perpetuate social relationships, just as rituals work to create and perpetuate social worlds.

Moreover, researchers who have conducted fieldwork in Japan can relate to how many informants are "responsive": individuals will keep promises to come to

meetings at agreed times, or once institutions grant a researcher access they will prepare to have him/her on the inside. However as “reciprocity goes hand in hand with the process of getting along” (Roberts 2003: 311), this also entails reciprocal expectations and responsibilities for the fieldworker. While this can be constraining to a researcher who has to deal with multiple responsibilities across various groups (Roth 2003: 349), it is important for the fieldworker to be aware that they are also becoming part of such cosmological relationships, as well as to recognize the meaning of such involvement in terms of trust and responsibility when doing fieldwork in Japan.

While the researcher is in the field, they are part of the system of developing and maintaining good relations through their continued involvement therein. However, it is difficult to maintain the same degree of involvement once the researcher is outside the field (see, for example, Hamabata 1991). One of the great challenges is tackling the growing sense of abstraction from the field when one returns to one’s home institution after intensive fieldwork. Researchers are also busy with their own lives, and it is easy to lose touch after leaving the field. However it is important to follow up with changes in the field, so it is best to keep in touch with key informants at least.

In such cases some researchers make it a rule to visit their sites and informants regularly, while others use social networking services to stay connected. I use seasonal greetings, ritualistic events, or some sort of major life event occurring as an incentive to write to my informants. Also, when I visit the areas where I did my fieldwork I make it a rule to visit them. Surprisingly, most are very open to seeing me despite my long absences, and this also further strengthens our relationship. In addition, I also send messages or call them if a disaster hits the regions where my informants are from. So keeping up with current events is also important, as one can share similar information with their informants about what is happening in Japan. This way, even when not in the field, one can still maintain symbolic relationships to a certain extent.

## **The Life-Changing Magic of Fieldwork**

It was during this defining moment [the 1920s] that modern anthropology’s fundamental “methodological values” — the taken-for-granted, pre-theoretical notions of what it is to do anthropology (and to be an anthropologist) — began to be established: the value placed on fieldwork as the basic constituting experience both of anthropologists and of anthropological knowledge; the value placed on a holistic approach to the entities that are the subject of this form of knowledge; the value placed on a relativistic valuation of all such entities; and the value placed on their uniquely privileged role in the constitution of anthropological theory. (Stocking 1992: 284)

The opportunity to do fieldwork is a very rare and special chance for researchers. The historian of anthropology George Stocking (1992), characterizes fieldwork as

“the ethnographer’s magic.” This holds true on two levels: First, to make fieldwork work, one must be able to immerse oneself in the experiences of the field, synthesizing sometimes years of fieldwork into concise and evocative vignettes through careful framing, theorizing, and making the field site and informants palpably real to your readers. Second, fieldwork itself can be a near mystical experience — one’s first extended fieldwork trip is a kind of rite of passage that will transform the researcher as well as the process of knowledge production. As Moshe Shokeid notes, “fieldwork is a term that has been employed for nearly a century by social-cultural anthropologists as a major methodological tool and a profound professional experience that leaves its mark on their lives throughout their careers” (2015: 149). In these ways, fieldwork should never be taken as a given. Moreover, the time and effort one puts into fieldwork will directly impact on the subsequent stages of one’s research, analysis, and writing — and the longer and more deeply one becomes embedded in the social fabric of informants’ lifeworlds, the richer the results will be. As fieldwork in Japan entails becoming part of the *cosmology* of one’s informants, complete with its own challenges and gratifications, it is a long-term endeavor that can lead to long-lasting and life-changing engagements for oneself and one’s informants that may shape one’s personal and professional life for years to come.

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