*Editorial:*

# The Social Relations of Fieldwork: Giving Back in a Research Setting

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## Abstract

The project of this special issue emerged from the guest editors' experiences as field researchers in sub-Saharan Africa. During this time both researchers faced the difficult question of "giving back" to the communities in which, and with whom, they worked— communities that were often far less privileged than the researchers were in terms of wealth, mobility, education, and access to health care. Returning from their field sites, both researchers felt a combination of guilt and frustration that they had not done enough or had not done things right. Thus emerged the idea of bringing together a group of researchers, from a range of disciplines, to discuss the topic of giving back in field research. This editorial describes the idea and process that led to the present collection of articles. The guest editors situate the project in the literature on feminist studies and briefly summarize each of the four thematic sections in this special issue. They conclude by emphasizing that their collection is not a guide to giving back. Rather than lay out hard and fast rules about what, how much, and to whom field researchers should give, their collection offers a series of examples and considerations for giving back in fieldwork.

**Index Terms:** fieldwork; giving back; research ethics; feminist standpoint theory; participatory action research; reflexive activism; dynamic reciprocity

*Authors' Note*. We have equally contributed to this work; we therefore simply list our names in alphabetical order.

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## 1. Introduction

No field researcher stands alone. All of us, whether we are conservation biologists trying to collect data on the biota of a rainforest or critical geographers seeking to answer political economic questions, we work in partnership with a cadre of people. These people may be research assistants, porters, local government officials, professors, NGO employees, and often whole towns or communities. In many ways our careers are built on the shoulders of these people as they help us collect data, offer up the data we need, and/or show us how to navigate the places where we do our fieldwork. As we work side by side with these individuals, interviewing some about intimate and sometimes painful details, we cannot help but become woven into the fabric of their lives in one way or another. As we interact with people who are often of different cultural, socio-economic, and ethnic backgrounds, or who have very different worldviews, the frictions that arise in these relationships are sometimes amplified, and can become convoluted and difficult. In particular, we often feel compelled to reciprocate the generosity of those whom we encounter in the field, without necessarily knowing the best way to do so.

A desire for shared exchange with our field collaborators causes many of us to consider giving back to these people who have helped us along the way, particularly in places where we happen to be wealthier, better educated, and more mobile than much of the population. Even in situations where we have less power and privilege than the people we study (cases of "studying up," e.g., Burawoy, 1998; Nader, 1972), we often consider the act of giving back, whether we choose to do so or not. While discipline-specific literature on methodology provides an understanding of how to conduct a survey, an interview, or an ecological transect, it does not prepare us for the social exchanges that will repeatedly occur while in the field and that may haunt us afterwards. Though everyday acts of giving back are often considered to be outside the realm of typical field methods, they have implications for the success of our work, for our comfort in the field, and the wellbeing of the communities in which we live and do our research.

To make sense of giving back, we must make a distinction between this term and charity. Charity is giving. People give for many reasons that range from aspirations towards heaven, attempts to alleviate guilt, or outrage over poverty. Giving back is reciprocal. By its very construction, it connotes having already received something from the person one is giving to—what Vaughan (this issue) calls "sharing abundance." And it is *relational*, in that it does not operate simply on a tit-for-tat basis (Diver and Higgins, this issue). When we talk about the reciprocal social relations of fieldwork—what we call "giving back"— we are talking about interacting with people in a very basic sense. Finney (this issue), reminds us that before we are professors, researchers, or students, we are just people: "And sometimes giving back starts with the ability of looking at another human being and giving with no agenda other than to say, thank you." What this collection does is

consider different ways in which this reciprocity has played out in our contributors' research. Here conservation biologists, political ecologists, city and regional planners, science and technology scholars, and public health researchers have all tried to answer the questions of if, how, when, why, and to whom they give back in their field work.

The act of giving back is, for some, a direct response to a history of colonial scholarship that exploited study "subjects" by taking (some would say, stealing) their knowledge without acknowledgement or any kind of recompense (Smith, 1999). Indigenous Studies, among other disciplines, dwells on ways in which research can be self-determined and/or more inclusive, useful, and empowering for the communities that are a part of this work (e.g., Dillard, 2008; Gibson & Cameron, 2005; Smith, 1999). For others, the notion of giving back falls within the framework of research ethics. At the most basic level, institutional review boards (IRBs) have been established to ensure ethical research practice, borne out of a dark history of (primarily medical) research which took advantage of vulnerable populations like prisoners, children, and the mentally disabled (e.g., National Commission, 1979; National Research Act of 1974; Singer & Levine, 2003). These guidelines provide rules about remuneration, selection for study, and treatment of human participants in an effort to reduce coercion and inequity in research. Yet as most practicing researchers know, especially those of us who approach research from a feminist standpoint, research ethics is about more than adherence to institutional protocols (see Sasser, this issue, Article M7). At the very base of it, most of us want to be able to say "thank you" in meaningful, useful, and culturally appropriate ways.

When we talk about giving back in the context of fieldwork, we are inevitably invoking questions of resource sharing, reciprocity, exchange, and social interactions mediated by power, privilege, and lines of difference. While researchers from a variety of disciplines may or may not implicitly consider these topics when in the field, these issues are the explicit focus of feminist studies. Feminist methodologies do not simply focus on the study of women. Rather, feminist methodologies and praxis tackle questions of power and privilege and try to redress the hierarchical relations that so frequently characterize fieldwork (e.g., Naples, 2003; Sangtin Writers & Nagar, 2006; Wilkinson, 1998). This body of literature is critical for advancing the self-reflexivity of researchers, and for developing more equitable, collaborative, and socially just research platforms. However, it is often written in language not easily accessible to, or read by, broad audiences—in particular those not familiar with social theory. We believe this is unfortunate because scholars from all disciplines—whether they are conducting interviews or measuring tree cores—exist within a web of complex social relations as soon as they enter the field.

As Haraway (1988) has noted, all research (whether it be on plant ecology or cultural practices) comes from somewhere and someone—there is no disembodied production of knowledge. Instead, as researchers we must consider where we are coming from, who we are, and how we relate to those we work with (for more on feminist standpoint theory, see Collins, 2000; Harding, 2004; Hartsock, 1983; Smith, 2004). We must constantly negotiate and re-negotiate our relationships with the communities we study, or collaborate with, through particular and ongoing everyday interactions. We must also remain aware of how our epistemological stances, reflexive activism, analyses, and

translations may influence the nature of those relationships (Naples, 2003; Sangtin Writers & Nagar, 2006). These considerations are important not only for improving our theoretical understandings of power, identity, and knowledge, but also for dealing with the practical realities of fieldwork and on-going collaborations. For example, what do you do when a villager asks for a water bottle, an item you cannot share with the whole community? If you meet a sick or injured child should you pay for his/her medical care? What kind of advocacy is desired or appropriate? How long should you engage in reciprocal relationships and how much should you invest in them? When is it inappropriate to give back?

This writing project was born out of our experiences as field researchers in sub-Saharan Africa where we were both faced with the difficult question of giving back to the people of communities we worked in, most of whom were far less privileged than ourselves in terms of wealth, mobility, education, and access to health care. Without the guidance, generosity of time, and goodwill of these people, neither of us would have ever finished our doctoral research. When we each returned from our field sites, we both felt a combination of guilt and frustration that we had not done enough or we had not done things right. Struggling with these emotions we brought the issue of how to give back to our colleagues at Berkeley. We were overwhelmed by the response. Each person had grappled with the issue of giving back in her or his fieldwork.

We started first with an informal round-table discussion on the topic that we recorded and later transcribed. We then invited round-table participants and a handful of other interested scholars from a range of disciplines to put their thoughts on paper and contribute a short reflection piece on their individual experiences of giving back. After we collaborated with other scholars in the "Geographies of Hope Symposium" sponsored by the Association of American Geographer's Indigenous Peoples Specialty Group, a second group of writers joined our effort, writing pieces that synthesized the different themes that emerged from the field reflections others had written for the collection. In the remainder of the introduction we briefly describe some of the key themes and most salient points that emerged from our group's collection of short essays on giving back.

In putting together this collection we found universal insecurity on the part of all the authors regarding their contributions. Each one of us struggled with these reflections, trying to put into words the actions that, for some of us, had become routine and, for others, were frequent sources of stress and concern. Even the most experienced among us were worried we had it wrong. We believe the fact that everyone was so unsure about their contributions—embarrassed even—is evidence that there is not enough written about practical acts of reciprocity in fieldwork. None of us knew if what we were doing was the right thing, how it compared to other people's attempts, or if our failures/successes were isolated incidents or mirrored similar trajectories elsewhere. As Wesner et al. (this issue) note, the stories presented here collectively pose the problem of the everyday: how prepared are we, really, to negotiate each and every moment of discomfort, privilege, and difference once we are in the midst of it all? Do the methods we formulate in the academy help us accept generosity, overcome inhibiting guilt, and acknowledge our true constraints and limitations? How do theory and practice meet on

the most fundamental human level of cultivating gratitude and trust, together? In other words, how do we walk the line of doing good research while also being good researchers (Sasser, this issue, Article M7)?

## 2. Themes of the Collection

The authors in this Special Issue write about decisions they made about to whom they give back and the means by which they give back in different ways. Though we originally envisioned a discussion of giving back in terms of immediate material or practical acts of reciprocity (sharing food, water bottles, or rides, for example), when we invited more contributors to our project, some had a different interpretation of what giving back meant. In this Special Issue we have organized the contributions of our authors into four thematic sections: (1) Practical Realities of Giving Back, (2) Limits to Giving Back, (3) Giving Back in Solidarity, and (4) Giving Back Through Collaboration in Practice. Here we briefly outline these emergent themes and discuss some issues that cross-cut all of these clusters.

### 2.1. Practical Realities of Giving Back

Some of us give back to those who we interview, live with, and learn from. Some of us focus on those who translate for us, guide us, and collaborate with us. Others give back to whole communities by lobbying for them or funding infrastructure. For some of us, this means bringing food, medicine, and money into a community. For others this means offering help with grant writing and education. For some, giving back is tied to an actual research project, when we aim for our research results to improve the lives of those whom we studied and collaborated with (Sarna-Wojcicki, Vaughan, Higgins, Kremen, all in this issue). Some of us are activists, engaging directly in the struggles we study, while others among us just supply information and data to battles that are not our own (Ybarra, this issue). For others, giving back means simply the everyday actions that take place in a field site—helping in a garden, giving rides, babysitting, or sharing food and medicine. Baker-Médard, Ybarra, Kelly, Lund, and Golden (all in this issue) describe giving back in non-material ways—through humor and by providing avenues for expression. In widely disparate contexts, Goldberg, Lund, and Kelly (all in this issue) all mention the power of interviewing as part of a healing process for those who want their voices heard and stories told.

### 2.2. Limits to Giving Back

Even if our research and acts of reciprocity have the power to produce an effect, a number of the authors in this collection recognize that it may not be the one intended, and may have consequences that "could linger long after the formal research project has ended" (Sasser, this issue, Article M7). Often, our authors experienced unintended (and unexpected) consequences of acts of giving back. For example, Dwyer wonders whether providing maps to a district officer in Laos will indirectly facilitate land dispossession of marginalized village farmers. To avoid potential pitfalls, many of our contributing authors allude to how, over the course of their fieldwork, they have slowly begun to

understand what Fiorella (this issue) explicitly recognizes as "reciprocity and norms" at micro- and macro-scales in the communities in which they work.

Understanding what reciprocity and norms should look like is not always easy, however, and is not the same for all people in all places. Romm (this issue) notes, "We are challenged instead to encourage the particular forms [of giving back] that are possible for unique people and situations." Romm points to the limitations that circumstance may place on how we may be able to give back, regardless of our desires. Perhaps in some cases, small everyday gestures may be the most we can manage to give back to certain people, while in others, one's research results may be poised to have a long-term beneficial influence on people's lives. Flexibility in how we conceive of giving back is required not only across field sites but also as one's own fieldwork progresses. No field site is static, just as no research inquiry is static. There are times when we need to improvise how we give back and adapt to the changing circumstances at hand (Cerwonka & Malkki, 2007; Sasser, this issue, Article N13). In some cases we choose not to give back for very important reasons. For example, Sasser (this issue, Article N13) chooses not to give back because those she works with are powerful, wealthy, and well educated. In other cases, some of us have tried to give back and seen it as a failure—leading to jealousy, avarice, or trouble in the community for ourselves, or for our research. It is especially in these experiences that we realize, as Sasser (this issue, Article M7) aptly notes, "having good intentions is not enough."

### 2.3. Giving Back in Solidarity

When research is truly collaborative and participatory, the researcher must be willing to share control and ownership over the terms on which the research, and accompanying forms of giving back, are designed, conducted, and disseminated (Ospina et al. 2007; Sangtin Writers & Nagar, 2006). Several of our authors question whether engaging with the concept of giving back allows room for this kind of research at all. Bhan and TallBear push us to consider whether the giving back framework reinforces a power-laden and potentially dangerous binary between researcher and participant. Bhan and TallBear both offer new ways of thinking about the relationship between researchers and their participants. Though they use different terminology—Bhan employs the term "engagement" while TallBear suggests that we "stand with" our research participants— these two authors both attempt to move beyond the giving back framework to an approach that is more collaborative and inclusive. Chen and Bhan (both in this issue) write eloquently about the pivotal point when "informants" become "collaborators," and how a collaborative exchange began as these people had a say in what topics were identified as salient for continued research and in how they themselves were represented. Chen (this issue) retains the terminology of giving back, but also explicitly recognizes that a research program driven by the desire to make change through giving back cannot be done without the direct and explicit partnership of those who would otherwise be construed as objects of inquiry. Like Golberg (this issue), as well as many feminist and indigenous scholars, he reminds us that "'giving back' should be a model of solidarity and movement building, not charity" (Chen, this issue).

## 2.4. Giving Back Through Collaboration and Practice

Several authors, Higgins, Sarna-Wojcicki, and Vaughan in particular, expressed that while they felt it easier to give back through small, individual, "mundane" everyday actions (e.g., chopping firewood, delivering freshly baked bread, or translating a document), they felt the need to give back through their research in ways that were longer-lasting and served the communities in which they worked. Most of the authors envision this kind of contribution to mean helping to empower communities, such as in the realm of environmental management decision-making (e.g., Higgins, Sarna-Wojcicki, and Vaughan, all in this issue). These authors considered the larger projects of working with their research participants to meet larger political and social goals as a kind of giving back. While these contributions include less discussion of the practice of giving back in the immediate sense, this group of field reflections broadens the discussion of giving back, to include the role of participatory action research (Ospina, Dodge, Foldy & Hofmann-Pinilla, 2008; Whyte, 1991) or reflexive activism (Sangtin Writers & Nagar, 2006).

Several of our contributors wrote about their attempts to put this kind of engaged collaborative scholarship into practice. Diver and Higgins (this issue) introduce the term *dynamic reciprocity* to describe their understanding of effective community-based participatory research. Of dynamic reciprocity, they write:

It is not a static process. It is time and context dependent—contingent on momentary circumstances and particular community needs. The extent and impact of our giving back changes over time, as do perceptions of our researcher role and local needs. Meaningful benefits may be intangible, fleeting, or they may not emerge for a long time. (Diver & Higgins, this issue, Article M9, Section 3)

Diver (this issue) stresses the importance of meaningful partnership through her detailed description of a collaborative research initiative to create a historical timeline of Karuk tribal land management—a project in which she believed the process was as important as the final product. Higgins and Vaughn (both in this issue) also describe creating a framework for professional resource managers and academic researchers to work more collaboratively with citizen scientists as an act of giving back.

Though we certainly agree that it would be impossible to talk about solidarity and reciprocity in fieldwork without bringing up participatory research and activism, we do wonder why it is that we so quickly dismiss our small acts of reciprocity or kindness. Are we trained to assume that our research will/must serve a greater good, or to strive for that goal while ignoring the everyday interactions that matter as well (Smith 1999, p. 2)? Our attention on the grander outputs of our research surely comes from a genuine desire to make a lasting beneficial impact. Yet this focus also possibly arises because of a preconceived idea of what avenues of societal contribution are legitimate for academics (scholarly research that results in policies or courses steered that "make a difference" to people's lives) and what are not (acts that fall outside the rubric of research, like giving an interviewee a ride to the hospital). We ask ourselves, is it right to privilege one over

the other? As Romm (this issue) points out, "There is no one way to give back. Indeed, the possibilities are as diverse as the personalities, settings, and disciplines involved."

### 2.5. Overarching Themes

Almost every author, either directly or indirectly, grappled with the issue of scale (in space and time) when giving back. Those who think about scale on a spatial level ask—do we give to those who are right in front of us, such as in the case of a medical emergency that Fiorella describes; do we give back to entire communities through activism (Goldberg and Bhan), infrastructure or a "thank-you" party (Gupta); or are we content with giving back by advancing knowledge to society in general? For most, giving back involves a mix of what Goldberg calls the "individual" and the "collective." For those of us who consider scale on a temporal level, we ask—do we give back in ways that will extend well beyond our time in the field—for example, in the case of career advancement for research assistants (Gupta, Golden, and Kremen)? Or do we act in the short term—giving back in the moment? Fiorella gives us an excellent example of this as she describes reaching out in an emergency. Romm reminds us that often, the most successful forms of giving back occur when the researcher maintains a sustained, long-term presence in the community of study. Similarly, Ybarra, Baker-Médard, and Golden make the case that remembering people from our field sites and having continuous interactions with them is, in itself, a means of giving back.

Another overarching theme that emerged from this collection is that, when giving back, history matters. As Dwyer, Ybarra, and Higgins (all in this issue) show, the historical precedents set by other "outsiders" coming into the places where we work can create varying expectations for how and in what ways we should give back. These precedents can also make us wary of giving back in certain ways. For example, Ybarra recollects her concern that her presence during fieldwork in Guatemala should not serve to reproduce the culture of dependency and "pastoral care" relationship that her own research critiques.

## 3. Conclusion

All of us recognize that giving back—if we decide to do it at all—will always be partial and incomplete. Giving back is not a "purist endeavor" (Diver & Higgins, this issue) and is often steeped with ambivalence (Sasser, this issue, Article N13). We realize that we can never fully reciprocate the time, kindness, company, and resources shared with us and we will be taking away possibly more than we give back. We understand that we can never actually know all the ways in which power and difference operate, and thus we are unlikely to fully address these relations in ways that might bring about complete equity. Indeed, stories of "fumbling through the field" reflect our skepticism that the academy aptly prepares us to (re)construct—or perhaps, as Smith (1999) aims, de-colonize—research as a possible means for producing better, more equitable ways of being in relation to those in our field sites (Wesner et al., this issue). Yet we believe that acknowledging that true equity may prove elusive should not preclude us from engaging with important questions about reciprocity and field relations. Admitting these limitations

but still working to move forward gives us room to deepen the relationships we build in our research communities. As one of our astute reviewers queried:

What would happen if we begin with the premise that we will never know the ways in which our ways of doing research and representing the lives and concerns of those less privileged than us will also be ridden with injustice and epistemic violence? What might it mean to have that as the starting point, and how that might actually strengthen (rather than weaken) our relationships with those we work with? (Anonymous reviewer, December 2013)

As we trace our different authors' considerations of giving back, it is possible to identify two approaches. Those who follow the first approach emphasize the importance of everyday acts of kindness and friendship (e.g., giving someone a ride, helping out in an emergency) that come from a sense of empathy, neighborliness, and desire to share resources first and foremost. Those who take the second approach critique the first as an act of "charity" (e.g., Chen, Goldberg, both in this issue) and seek avenues for researchers and participants to engage and collaborate with each other in ways that supersede the need for giving back. Yet we would argue that these two approaches have more in common with each other than might appear at first glance. Working from, and building upon, small, everyday interactions and acts of reciprocity may help us as researchers produce knowledge that can transform and broaden the impacts of our research (Bodwich, this issue).

A feminist research methodology actively accounts for and addresses the power imbalances that exist not just between men and women, but also between researcher and participant (Bhan, this issue). Throughout this special issue, the authors are aware of their locality, which is frequently a privileged and powerful rung on the researcher/researched hierarchical ladder, and are struggling to resolve the ethical, emotional, and interpersonal questions and quandaries that inevitably arise when one goes to the field to do research. Through this process each of us has considered the common humanity that binds us together with those whose lives we document or touch in some capacity or another. Whether a sense of this solidarity leads us to "give" in less tight-fisted ways (e.g., Baker-Médard, this issue, writes about letting go of her "development scheme" requirements for loans to neighbors), or to extend research interviews into free-flowing conversational exchanges (Baker-Médard, Kelly, and Chen, all in this issue), or to focus on collaborative acts of community organizing, we are all learning about and reflecting upon the nature of the social interactions that develop during fieldwork. As Wesner et al. and Bodwitch (both in this issue) point out, it is the practicalities of giving back—the nitty-gritty on-the-ground negotiations—that serve as crucial moments for analysis and inquiry. These stories often make for more easily relatable, tell-able, and understandable examples of how privilege and power matter in research.

Approaches to fieldwork that center around "engagement" with communities (Bhan, this issue) versus everyday reciprocal exchange may lead to different choices by the researcher, but these are based on a common premise—that, as researchers, we live and work side by side with people who are simultaneously worlds apart and not very different

from us at all. This recognition may sound silly or simplistic, but it is easy to overlook from the vantage point of university libraries, dissertation prospectus drafts, and IRB reviews. It is not inherently obvious how to navigate the murky waters of interpersonal relationships that are a part of fieldwork, and several of us feel as though we have failed in this regard in one way or another (Sawyer, Kelly, and Gupta, all this issue). Yet critical reflection, even if it muddies the waters, is the first step. This collection is not a guide on giving back. It does not (nor can it) lay out hard and fast rules about what, how much, and to whom we should give. Instead, it lays out a series of examples and considerations of giving back in fieldwork, offering a first of hopefully many forays into inquiries on this topic and, at the very least, making those of us who struggle with giving back in different ways feel less alone.

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