

Journal of Research Practice
Volume 12, Issue 2, Article R2, 2016



Review:

Anthropologist-Parents as Researchers: A Critical Appreciation of ‘Doing Fieldwork in China . . . With Kids!’ by Cornet and Blumenfield

Malathi Raghavan

Purdue University College of Veterinary Medicine, West Lafayette,
Indiana, UNITED STATES;

University of Manitoba Rady Faculty of Health Sciences, Winnipeg,
Manitoba, CANADA

raghavm@purdue.edu

Abstract

This article is a review of a book that contains reflective accounts by western anthropologists who were accompanied by their children when they were conducting their anthropological fieldwork in rural China. The presence of the children resulted in unplanned interactions, leading to new data for their research. It also triggered new questions on the researchers’ cultural assumptions. Although set in the specific context of anthropological fieldwork, the reflective accounts can serve as useful learning material for early-stage researchers in many other fields.

Index Terms: impact on fieldwork; cross-cultural environment; research education; researcher as cultural being; researcher as parent; researcher objectivity; researcher positionality; cultural relativism; co-researchers

Suggested Citation: Raghavan, M. (2016). Anthropologist-parents as researchers: A critical appreciation of ‘Doing fieldwork in China . . . with kids!’ by Cornet and Blumenfield. *Journal of Research Practice*, 12(2), Article R2. Retrieved from <http://jrp.icaap.org/index.php/jrp/article/view/555/455>

Doing Fieldwork in China . . . With Kids! The Dynamics of Accompanied Fieldwork in the People's Republic. Book edited by Candice Cornet and Tami Blumenfield. Published by NIAS Press, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, Copenhagen, Denmark, 2015, 336 pages, ISBN-13: 978-8776941703. Amazon price: Hardcover USD80, Paperback USD27.99 (as on November 24, 2016).

Candice Cornet and Tami Blumenfield, anthropologists with extensive fieldwork experience, edited a volume of contributions on the very specific topic of anthropologists doing fieldwork in rural China with their children in tow (Cornet & Blumenfield, 2015, all direct quotes cited below are from this book). The title *Doing Fieldwork in China . . . With Kids!* is deceptively simple. At first glance, it seemed like a very specific, niche topic, causing me to briefly wonder how is it possible to write a whole book on such a focused theme. However, the book is a rich collection of sensitive and reflective writings by anthropologist-parents conducting research on a variety of subjects ranging from early education to ethnobiology to religion in the People's Republic of China. All the voices—representing US American, Canadian, or Norwegian origin and training—effectively capture reflections on the fluidity of positionality (i.e., the understanding that one's position is in relation to others), objectivity (neutrality or lack of judgment), and the concept of cultural relativism (that an individual's beliefs and actions are to be understood with reference to the individual's own culture).

The idea of this book originated as an invited session sponsored by the Society for East Asia Anthropology at the American Anthropological Association's annual meeting in San Francisco in 2012. Seven anthropologist-parents—six of whom are women—and two children, now grown-up, contribute to this edited collection. (The editors themselves contribute two chapters each, in addition to writing the introduction.) The arrival of this book coincides with demographic changes in graduate education in the U.S. In 2002, the U.S. witnessed its first ever cohort of U.S. doctoral recipients with a majority of women. Women now receive 60% of all anthropology doctoral degrees earned in the U.S., substantially increasing the number of women who do pre- or post-dissertation fieldwork in their child-bearing ages. Family structures are also changing, forcing parents—whether single or not—to figure out ways to balance family life with career responsibilities. In the words of the editors, “this challenge is rarely discussed in methodological discussions on fieldwork.”

The contents of the book cover a wide range of human experiences lived, lessons learned, and insights gained. We gain an understanding of options, decisions, and ramifications at every stage of the research journey. Not only is the field of anthropology made richer by this contribution, but the practice of reflective research stands to gain in understanding and knowledge as the insights shared seem applicable to any field—for example, researchers in healthcare will especially find Denise Glover's insight that cultural convictions relative to health and illness are most heightened in one's role as a parent.

Similarly, each chapter reveals, to parents and reflective researchers alike, ideas and thought processes that are at once familiar and thought-provoking.

The editorial introduction is a rich, persuasive, and passionate account of fieldwork accompanied by children, and the benefits and pitfalls of disclosing to local communities the researcher's additional identity and status as a parent. The book is then divided into nine chapters grouped into three parts. Part I covers health, fieldwork, and family configuration. Part II gives space for the voices of the accompanying children and also for the experiential learning that comes from traveling to the field over a course of several years and through different life events. Part III is reserved for perspectives, in the form of art and drawings, from children too young to write, and logistical advice for adults considering relocation to the field with children. The last section is especially helpful for all parents relocating temporarily for work, research or otherwise, and not just for anthropologist-parents. Although written in the context of conducting fieldwork, the last section outlines options and realistic expectations regarding physical travel, childcare, healthcare, and schooling. Almost all that is written in this book can serve as learning material for all researchers, as much of the text contains reflective accounts of research practice in language that is accessible to all. I am an epidemiologist by training who has migrated to the field of assessment and evaluation of outcomes in the education of health professionals. I found the book to be free of specialist jargon and easy to follow.

The authors address a variety of issues and concerns—how decisions about bringing children to field (or not) get made; once there, how children compete for researcher's time and attention, directly and indirectly affect data collection (resulting in richer, unexpected data, for the most part), open doors to unplanned conversations and interviews by their mere presence, alter researcher's positionality, and challenge researchers' cultural assumptions. Through narrative examples the authors describe ways in which children, by merely being present, impose a limit on researcher objectivity. The researchers bring with them specific ideas and beliefs on child rearing practices that touch upon foods, relative wealth, health and safety, socialization, and education—all of these become visible due to the practical matters of parenting styles and choices made.

The issues I have listed thus far are the common themes and concerns running through the writings of almost all authors. Each chapter, however, is embedded with uniquely discussed concepts such as children not getting credit for facilitating knowledge production, children's rights being violated when they are brought along and put to work (whether directly or indirectly). As early as in the introduction section, the editors have included a convenient summary-table on positive ramifications and negative consequences of bringing along children while doing fieldwork.

Each chapter fundamentally sets itself apart from the next as the authors tap into a variety of research interests, years of experiences gathered as a parent and additionally as an anthropologist, and issues personally encountered. Take for instance Mette Halskov Hansen's realization that her position forces her to confront an identity she did not previously give much thought to.

I had come to Xiahe with my background as a privileged Northern European who takes for granted the free choice of the number of children one wants, and receives generous financial support from the state for each child born. And I had settled, with two daughters with only two years between them, in an office where the staff was constantly concerned with how to best propagate, convince, sometimes force, people to have fewer children and to wait at least 4-5 years between each birth. Therefore, the staff always strongly emphasized my *foreignness* when answering the flow of questions they got from local people . . . They never blamed us, . . . but our experience of being again and again presented as rich, fortunate, privileged foreigners who could afford not to consider having only one child, also made us more aware of the fact that this was, maybe exactly what we were. (p. 31)

Hansen also addresses eloquently and sincerely the dilemma of ultimately choosing private, international schooling for her children after having studied Chinese public school education system for years as a researcher. “By exposing my hypocrisy, people around me helped clarify my own limits to cultural relativism and we could [then] proceed with more equal and also deeper discussions about education . . .” (p. 35).

Despite not being an anthropologist, I read with particular interest the experience of Jeanne Shea raising a child in a cross-cultural environment that provided opportunities not only for cultural immersion but also for cross-cultural missteps. Shea was invited to live in a multi-generation, upwardly-mobile Chinese household. Her account of navigating cross-cultural realities and expectations regarding everyday adult-child interactions, values, norms, are honest. “Having [a daughter] in China with me had the paradoxical effect of making my own familiar politeness customs often seem rather strange and obsessive to me, while at the same time deepening my resolve to follow them nonetheless” (p. 50). Shea explains:

In cross-cultural encounters, children’s cultural missteps are highly charged as they come embedded within social implications for progeny’s long-term socialization in home and host cultures and for guest-host relationships in the field. Since there is so much at stake in parenting and childrearing for both guest and host, the intellectual recognition of cultural difference is not enough to override strong emotional, moral and visceral feelings of something being not quite right for one’s child and a desire for one’s culture and way of childrearing to be not just different, but also right. (pp. 43-44)

Blumenfield, in Chapter 3, describes how more doors were opened than closed by the mere presence of children in the field. “Appearing for fieldwork as a mother-child duo instead of a decontextualized individual fieldworker changed how I was perceived, often leading to deeper interactions when we visited households” (p. 71). She explains how her role as a mother opened up new research questions about childbirth, child rearing, and parenting philosophies and practices.

Denise Glover, a cultural anthropologist as well as an ethnobiologist confronts limits to her own cultural relativism during the time her child undergoes a health crisis. Her

experience will resonate and inform people in healthcare fields. She reflexively explores—i.e., makes the research process itself the focus of inquiry and lays open pre-conceptions—the “tension between being a cultural being oneself and being the researcher of culture on the other” (p. 87). Her conversation with her advisor who reveals that 30 years earlier he lost a child in the field is one of the few indications to us that not all experiences have gone well. The chapter is especially poignant as we witness Glover sorting out her role as a mother and her role as a researcher and coming to terms with the cultural being she understands she is. This chapter could be essential reading on discussions about alternative medicine for students in healthcare professions.

Using the illustration of *kaimen* (the practice of opening the main gate to homes to signal the beginning of the social day), Eriberto Lozada Jr., who is the only father writing in this collection, explains to readers what it means to have family accompanying him. “In bringing my family to the field, I was opening my door to my neighbors, who in turn opened their doors to me and my family” (p. 103). The presence of his wife and child allowed him access to work with young women in their teen years—a demographic that was previously inaccessible to him, or actively avoided by him, by virtue of being a male—and also depend on his neighbor, a widow, as a source of information. Still, one of the most innovatively-structured chapter was written by Margaret Swain and Melissa Swain, a mother-daughter pair. Their conversational back-and-forth style works well and the various photographs give us a visual report of a future scholar in the making—Melissa Swain now is pursuing a scholarly life of her own.

There are two weaknesses in the book. One is the lack of detailed information on attitudes from anthropology-colleagues without children accompanying them to the field or from colleagues staying behind in their home countries. What are the biases, if any, from colleagues in the home country/culture who are uncomfortable with the mingling of career and family responsibility? Increasingly, negative bias against career mothers has been accepted as a phenomenon, but the authors themselves rarely address this issue. In the same vein, missing are the voices of parents who didn’t see through their projects or postponed/delayed the completion of their studies. In this, however, the book is not unusual—all research impact evaluations struggle to represent attrition voices—but nevertheless suffers from the lack. Authors only represent those who have managed to stay in the system, move along the pipeline, and hold positions in academia.

Two, we get a picture of the reactions and viewpoints of the research participant/informant in the field only indirectly through the researchers’ (sincere and reflective) voices and not via direct voices or dedicated space. We interpret the positive and negative consequences (such as increased or decreased rapport between the researcher and the researched, the handling of children’s mishaps and misdeeds, and the sensitive navigation of bringing multiple kids into a country with a one-child policy) through the interpretative lens of the researchers themselves, but we never hear directly from the local communities.

One minor source of confusion, for me at least, was not being able to find the direct voice of E. Patrick Lozada III in Chapter 5 that he co-wrote with his father Eriberto P. Lozada Jr. Elsewhere, in Chapter 6, under Melissa Swain’s writing, there is a note to see “squashed pigs’ heads . . . eating dog in the country; and dining at the student’s cafeteria

on campus” (p. 125), but I was unable to spot this section. However, none of these issues detract from this excellent book which can become essential reading not only for those training to be anthropologists, but also for all research trainees who are likely to encounter cross-cultural research contexts.

Despite the specific nature of the topic, this book provides useful learning material for all researchers curious about their own research practice. As Dash (2009) notes in the context of needing to provide, to beginning researchers in all fields, research education that is non-linear, “there is a dire need for learning material that would help research students acquire a familiarity with the real world of research” (Section 3, “Research Education”). This edited collection makes a contribution to fill that void.

References

- Cornet, C., & Blumenfield, T. (Eds.). (2015). *Doing fieldwork in china . . . with kids! The dynamics of accompanied fieldwork in the People’s Republic*. Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS Press.
- Dash, D. P. (2009). Science as reflective practice: A review of Frederick Grinnell’s book, ‘Everyday practice of science’. *Journal of Research Practice*, 5(1), Article R1. Retrieved from <http://jrp.icaap.org/index.php/jrp/article/view/175/171>

Received 23 November 2016 | Accepted 25 November 2016 | Published 30 November 2016

Copyright © 2016 *Journal of Research Practice* and the author