Embodied Researchers: Gendered Bodies, Research Activity, and Pregnancy in the Field

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Kathleen B. Jones, in her now famous essay about women-friendly polities, explains that that citizenship must be redefined to include a body that does not “easily fit military-corporate uniforms” (1990, 794). Jones calls theorists to recognize women’s “embodied lives,” and in doing so, considers how “women’s bodies are problematic” and “sex/gendered identity affects . . . life” (786). We argue here that recognizing women’s embodied lives is similarly important to a discussion of gender and fieldwork. As researchers in the field, we have been defined by our social position as women, thus putting us at distinct disadvantages and advantages (Sundberg 2003).

Drawing largely from our experiences from dissertation-stage fieldwork in Spain (Candice Ortbals, CO) and Poland (Meg Rincker, MR), we explain how women’s bodies do not always easily fit the requirements of fieldwork. We first discuss practical physical and appearance-related concerns having to do with women’s bodies, and in doing so, run the risk of de-glamorizing the research process by discussing the mundane: building strong biceps, choosing the proper attire, and eating healthy food. Second, we debate the gendered appearance and representation of motherhood in the field from the perspectives of the expectant mother and mother-daughter relationships. In both discussions, we examine what it means to be a young woman conducting research abroad, arguing that interviewees often do not expect researchers to be young women, especially not young pregnant women. While our arguments pertain initially more to young women, we pose suggestions for field researchers regardless of gender, race, age, sexual orientation, and disability.

PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

Perhaps the most frustrating challenge for a young woman researcher is convincing interviewees and others in the field that she is in fact a researcher. Robin Leblanc, in Bicycle Citizens: The World of the Japanese Housewife, points out that her study of ordinary, housewife citizens was partially motivated by her initial lack of “fit” in the discipline of political science. She describes her appearance at the beginning of her political science career, namely that she was “small in stature” and looked young—more akin to a “nice suburban coed and hopeful housewife than a scholar” (1999, 6). Because of her exterior and youthful identity, her position as a scholar came into question (6).

We concur with Leblanc that young women researchers, due to their appearances that defy typical notions of a scholar, have an extra hurdle to jump, especially when first meeting interviewees. For example, just a couple of years ago at the age of 30, five years after beginning research in Spain, a bureaucrat told me (CO) that she did not have time to help a student with a school project. It takes extra patience to continue in a social interaction such as this, respectfully yet firmly explaining that one is a scholar and has the credentials to complete said research. I (CO) also have been treated curiously by male bureaucrats and politicians on several occasions, and fellow young women academics researching in Europe have told me that they have been awkwardly propositioned for social outings by male interviewees. Upon discussing such interactions with other researchers, I have come to realize that I may not be taken seriously as a woman until I look older. In other words, the embodied experience of a young woman researcher does not effortlessly coincide with what she hopes to feel like as an accomplished researcher.

ENDURANCE

Because gaining credibility is sometimes difficult, presenting oneself as a professional is key. Professionalism in an interview requires both an energetic demeanor and professional attire—both of which present women with special challenges. Although some women are fit and have great stamina, many of us, at least without significant training, do not have bulging biceps that could win a weightlifting contest. Given that fieldwork often requires transporting heavy paperwork (e.g., important documents copied from archives, publications/pamphlets received from activists and bureaucrats after interviews, etc.), and walking briskly to interviews, perhaps to a part of town with which one is unfamiliar, it behooves women researchers to think about how strong bodies would help with research. Strong bodies, for women and men, contribute to mental health and alertness, which are very important during a time-crunch research trip and during individual interviews.

A graduate professor once told me (CO) that exercise is important for maintaining sanity in academia; the same advice is true before and during fieldwork trips. One of the most difficult research days in Spain I can remember involved boxing up documents and sending them back to the States (a file box of paperwork that required heavy lifting). To save money I walked 10 minutes with it to the post office, instead of taking a taxi, only to stand in line at the post office for quite some time.
time more. This experience, like the times when I got lost on narrow, confusing streets in small towns, depleted me of energy. I quickly learned that being in good physical shape is as important as having the right theoretical model and/or interview questions. I have since learned to exercise routinely before leaving on a research trip and, if at all possible, to keep it up during the trip (even if that means weight lifting two-liter-sized water bottles for dumbbells). Though mundane, physical endurance can make or break a day of fieldwork research, which certainly costs a lot these days in terms of euros.

HEALTH

I (MR) completed most of my dissertation fieldwork during my pregnancies with Dominic (2002) and Theresa (2004). For expectant mothers doing fieldwork, embodied research means taking on health imperatives of traveling, scheduling interviews, and transporting documents while weaving in the health needs of another being. As Carol Gilligan describes in In a Different Voice, the physical experience of a baby growing inside of a pregnant woman often makes her keenly aware that people are interconnected, rather than individuals: “To be a mother in the societal as well as the physical sense requires the assumption of parental responsibility for and protection of a child” (1982, 76). This new reality can change a woman’s relationship with the space and people around her in the field. Whereas I (MR) timed my 2000 research trip solely based on the dates of an academic summer break, as an expectant field researcher in 2002, I timed my fieldwork in Poland to coincide with the second trimester of pregnancy, a point at which morning sickness often decreases, one’s energy increases, and air travel as an expectant woman is still considered fairly safe. Fortunately, my second trimester also coincided with a period when the national legislature in Poland was in session. If my second trimester had been between July and September, legislators and many professionals would have been difficult to reach because many Poles are on holiday during these months.

As Aili Mari Tripp describes, a support network is the foremost criterion for a pregnant field researcher (2003), and health information about one’s research site is an important second criterion. On my (MR) 2002 fieldwork trip, my initial concerns were missing regular conversations with friends and sisters about pregnancy and what to do if I had a medical emergency in Poland, so that I would not expose my baby to harmful medications. In contrast to my health concerns, many Poles I met suggested that I need not worry about drinking the occasional Zywiec beer or two. In the end, I encountered three main health challenges: eating healthfully, avoiding being around too much second-hand smoke, and dealing with food poisoning. Scheduling a precise interview time is not always an option in many cultural contexts, and this can be an especially inconvenient fact for a pregnant researcher. I often got access to Polish politicians at lunchtime, when they had a bit of free time, but by this point in the day I could be really hungry and concerned about stamina. In order to maintain a busy research schedule while pregnant, I made a point to eat a big breakfast and to bring along Cliff bars and prenatal vitamins.

Politicians chugging away on cigarettes during interviews was a less easily solved health dilemma. While part of this was due to Polish cultural acceptance for smoking in public offices, it also reflects that places of power tend to be masculine spaces in which self-interest of the powerful reigns. Though people I interviewed knew I was expecting, my connectedness to the health of an unborn child was forgotten. A few interviewees made a token effort to ask me about smoking but most did not. Faced with the choice of interrupting the interviewees to ask them not to smoke, or putting up with the smoke, I opted to put up with it to maintain friendly, relaxed conversation with interviewees.

Pregnancy and the notion of human connectedness and interdependence became more apparent to me after a bout of serious food poisoning during my fieldwork in Poland. This illness led me to rely on a trusted research assistant who could take me to the hospital. I was fine after an IV, but the doctor prescribed medication that my doctor at home did not condone. A very positive outcome of the bout of food poisoning was that it allowed me first-hand insight into the subject of my research, Polish health-care reforms. Because illness in the field is disconcerting for all researchers, we suggest that researchers carry health-insurance documents and contact numbers for doctors at home. If possible, it is helpful to have recommendations for good doctors in your country of fieldwork before you go.

Finally, embodied women researchers are faced with dressing appropriately for interviews with bureaucrats and
politicians, for women’s dress clothes are not always comfortable and convenient for a pregnant researcher or a researcher on the move. Keeping in mind that Poles and Spaniards are much dressier than the average American and that research can involve running, or at least briskly walking, between many appointments, fashionable women’s business attire was a must for both of us, yet it was not always comfortable. In fact, commentators have joked that Spanish women—even empowered women on the Left—who have achieved “the advances of feminism” are not “going to ditch” their “attachment to glamour” (Tremlett 2007, 209). As a result, attempting to be fashionable was a conscious choice for me (CO)—even as a feminist researcher who intellectually decries the fact that a woman “is not considered apart from her appearance: she is judged, respected, and desired by and through her” attire (de Beauvoir 1952, 760). Mimicking Spanish women’s shoe choices has been particularly disastrous for me: I have worn my feet out to the point of great pain and I have fallen down on a busy street when one of my heels became stuck between cobblestones. As a result, I now spend a significant amount of time before leaving on a research trip thinking about the most comfortable, yet professional, shoes to wear on interviews.

By the second trimester, there was little chance of hiding that I (MR) was pregnant in the field. It was difficult to fit a pregnant body into what Jones calls “military-corporate uniforms,” yet it was important for me to clad the baby bump in professional-looking maternity suits. While Poles were respectful of my identity as a mother and apparent commitment to the work that I would carry out while pregnant, I needed to fit the traditional mold of professional attire as much as possible. For graduate students or young professors, professional maternity suits can be a great expense after one has already invested in non-maternity business suits. I was fortunate to have a sisterhood of the traveling maternity pants in my family, and similarly I suggest that women scholars should pool maternity clothes to lessen these expenses.

**MOTHERHOOD IN THE FIELD**

While gender norms surrounding parenting are changing, mothers often maintain a role of primary caregiver. For many parents, fieldwork abroad presents the choice of whether to take children abroad, or to leave children in the care of family and friends at home. Both options entail costs and benefits. Leaving children at home, researching moms may feel great pangs of loneliness, yet know their children are safe and sound. The option that worked the best in my case was to do fieldwork on my own and leave my toddler at home in his dad’s care. My husband still takes great pride in the fact that while I (MR) was in Poland, he taught Dominic how to point at objects and use his words to ask for what he wanted. This decision also had the effect

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Meg Rincker (left) and attendees and teachers at the Jagiellonian University Summer Institute of Polish Language and Culture, summer 2002.
advantages. We argue that displaying respect for motherhood, in body or in relationships, can facilitate fieldwork in cultures that prize motherhood roles. When "fieldworkers fall within traditional societal norms ... and ... present a more conventional image," they are more easily accepted in the field (Flueher-Lobban and Lobban 1986, 193). In Poland and Spain there are strong traditional beliefs that "it is in maternity that woman fulfills her psychological destiny; it is her natural 'calling' " (de Beauvoir 1952, 542). As a result, we were both rewarded in the field for embodying conventional societal norms about mothers and children, thus leading us—even as feminists—to be both conventional in gender roles as well as in dress.

Being pregnant proved to be a great icebreaker in Polish society. My (MR) initial interactions with interviewees took a little extra time as everyone—men and women—asked when the baby was due before launching into interviews. These interactions, however, were invaluable for establishing rapport with interviewees. It made it much harder for Poles to turn down an interview with a pregnant woman, and, on public transportation, men and women would immediately hop up to make space. A very positive outcome of the bout of food poisoning was that it led me to rely on a trusted research assistant who could take me to the hospital. I was fine after an IV, but the doctor prescribed medication that my doctor at home did not condone. A very positive outcome of the bout of food poisoning was that it allowed me first-hand insight into the subject of my research, Polish health-care reforms.

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CONCLUDING REMARKS

The assumption of the able-bodied, bourgeois, and heterosexual male researcher as the norm closes off the realities of many going into the field (Sundberg 2003). Though some of our comments about being on the move and rushing to interviews pertain more closely to able-bodied researchers, we argue that, as social scientists, we need to be prepared for the physicality of research abroad, a concern that scientists with disabilities encounter on a daily basis (for discussion, see Gold 2003). We therefore suggest that preparation for fieldwork include not only scholarly work to train the mind, but also exercise to train the body. In the case of a pregnant field researcher, the needs of the mother and the child must be included and balanced. Professors, students, and funding agencies alike should consider the connectedness of scholars, and consider financial support to bring family members, children, or caretakers into the field. Once in the field, gender may affect the status of young women, particularly pregnant young women, as they conduct their fieldwork. To demonstrate their credentials to interviewees, a written letter or recommendation, or a personal visit by an in-country research associate or translator, can facilitate this status. Also, researchers expecting or bringing young children or dependent family members into the field...
should consider research sites that accord respect to children and parents.

In this article, we find that women's bodies and traditional identities yield both constraints and advantages. While constraints are unmistakingly disappointing, advantages for women researchers are welcome at times and awkward at others, putting them in the position to critically evaluate the self. Spanish men have helped Candice carry heavy items, and as mentioned above, Meg was always offered a tram seat. Though we have certainly had the urge to say, “hey, I can carry that,” or “I can stand,” it is tough to resist help after a hard day of research. At the same time, one must recall that these so-called advantages ultimately stem from the embodied lives women cannot escape.

NOTES

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REFERENCES


