

Guilty Fieldwork

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Abstract

Frohlick (2002) attributes the complications of her fieldwork experience to her gendered positioning as a guilty mother ‘who could not bear to leave her children for an extended absence or to give up her ambitious research sights/sites’ (pp. 49-50). As a female academic who conducted nine months of doctoral fieldwork in a rural village with an infant and fiancé, this quote is particularly poignant when reflecting on my own doctoral fieldwork. Frohlick’s admission of guilt has been a familiar emotion throughout my academic life and is common amongst some of my colleagues – also new and emerging researchers and mothers of young children. My choice to commence my doctoral candidature when three months pregnant, my selection of field site, the research and writing up were all highly gendered processes. The relational complexity inherent in my choices are not experiences that can be felt by a ‘lone ethnographer’ (Rosaldo, 1989) nor a ‘lone academic’. During my fieldwork, these choices and sacrifices have had a profound impact my positioned subjectivity in the field (Rosaldo, 1989), my reflections on how others respond to my family, my relationships with my husband and son, and my identity. Some of these have been positive experiences, others less so. The mother/wife/researcher nexus during the fieldwork and throughout my academic career says something profound about the additional challenges faced by an academic and mother of young children but also about how this impacts on the research process and academic outputs

Frohlick stated that she could neither ‘bear to leave her children for an extended absence [nor] to give up her ambitious research sights/sites’ (2002, pp. 49-50). Cupples writing of her children says, ‘I could not have managed without them for so long’ (in Cupples & Kindon 2003, p. 213). I shared these sentiments when embarking on my own doctoral fieldwork in 2003. I was by no stretch a ‘lone ethnographer’ (Rosaldo, 1989) as I brought my one year old son and my husband into the field with me for almost a year. For me, the notion of the ‘field’ as a ‘place’ ‘out there’ to be explored by the lone researcher was extended to a ‘space’ constituted by my husband and son and the complex intersubjectivities we all brought to the field and the research (see Caplan, 1993; Schrijvers, 1993; Killick, 1995 in Cupples and Kindon, 2003, p. 212).

As has been acknowledge by others who have conducted ‘accompanied research’, there were certainly a great many benefits to bringing a child and a partner into the field, and a Pasifika context appears particularly ideal in that regard. However, there are advantages and

disadvantages particular to bringing a family to live with research participants in any field (e.g. Flinn, Marshall, & Armstrong, 1998; Cupples & Kindon, 2003). The benefits may include a greater opportunity to build rapport; to become subjectively saturated in the culture; and to more critically reflect on family life. However, for me, the burden of responsibility I felt for the health and happiness of my husband and son throughout the doctoral journey, and the sacrifices my family had already made for me to complete the PhD, increased exponentially during the fieldwork period. When things were not going well for my family, these feelings of concern and responsibility became feelings of guilt. Guilt because this was primarily *my* life project which I wanted them to be a part of. My husband had trusted that I would ensure their support role would be one that would be challenging but that it would not risk our health or our relationship. This meant that the doctoral process was always at risk because I refused to put my doctorate before my family. Looking back, I often felt exhausted by the constant consideration of family health and happiness against PhD completion: something a lone researcher would never have to contend with.

Jacob, my nine-month-old, and I travelled to Taveuni, Fiji in March 2002 to determine the viability of researching community-based development there. The one-hour journey to Lavena Village from the nearest shop in Matei was heavily pot-holed and I struggled to support Jacob's neck as we lurched and bumped along. Despite having passed a health centre just before Korovou Village, I remember feeling anxious at the thought of taking my young family to a place where the nearest hospital was a two-hour drive to Wainekeli over a rough and often flooded dirt road. I came to discover that this was a site with the highest recorded cases of filiriasis in the Pacific. The island had also seen some devastating hurricanes in recent years.

The road finally stopped at what appeared to be the end of a small peninsula. An adult could walk from one end of the point to the other in about 5 minutes. We really were surrounded by water. Coming from New Zealand where it was illegal to own an unfenced swimming pool, I wondered how on earth was going to prevent my child from drowning here. During this initial stay, I encountered a long list of other potential risks: kerosene lanterns left sitting on floors at night; open fires and large pots of boiling water or food at ground level; children freely playing with machetes; and toddlers supervised only by six and seven year olds on the beach and at the river's edge. Despite all of this, I was assured that child injuries were very

low because the local kids develop skills and intuition uniquely adapted to their environment. I hoped we could all develop these local skills and perceptual knowledge too.

I returned to Fiji during in May 2003 with Jacob and my then partner, Matt (we were married in Waitabu Village in Bouma). After a bumpy flight from Nadi, we arrived at Matei in the afternoon and bought supplies for our host family. As Matei was a difficult one hour drive from Boum, I was anxious about how many baby supplies to purchase at this point. We had arrived with an arsenal of medical supplies so I felt confident we were covered there. I had also brought ten tins of soya milk formula for Jacob from New Zealand as he was lactose intolerant but I hadn't brought any baby food. I now started to worry that he might refuse the local food. Consequently, I stocked up on large quantities of this.

Jacob attained a kind of celebrity status due to his obvious differences from the other children. As a result, other parents and children found it amusing to encourage him to behave in ways we found upsetting (e.g. to hit other children and adults). We were often trying to balance our own discipline and boundaries for our son with what was possible in this new place. The heat only exacerbated the physical nature of everyday chores and our efforts to balance previously imagined expectations for family life in Bouma.

During fieldwork, my husband washed cotton nappies by hand and repeatedly hung them up to dry and took them down again throughout the course of a day when the rain came and went while caring for Jacob. Jacob was a wonderful asset in terms of enabling me to build rapport and he was a good excuse to simply sit with other women and chat. However, when I wanted to voice record a discussion, he could become restless or grizzly. This meant that I sometimes had to excuse myself to walk him back to Matt who was usually having a much deserved rest at the other end of the village. If I needed to interview people in another village, I could be away all day, leaving Matt and Jacob to entertain themselves. With no work of his own to do and limited local entertainment, I was very aware that the days could feel very long indeed for Matt.

Almost all the children had scabies and many had the swollen tummies indicative of worms. Despite this, we let him run freely with them as it would have been unrealistic and undesirable to try to quarantine him from his little friends. Like Cupples, my husband and I wanted our son to fully integrate into social life with his peers and to experience life as a little

'ai Lavena. Jacob did get sick though when Matt was away one time. He seemed well in himself but was rapidly losing weight.

We offered two different possibilities for his illness. One was that he was the victim of black magic and the second that our *bure* had been built too close to the sacred site (*yavu*/house mound) of a malevolent ancestor. In the first instance, we were told a group of men from the village had gone down to the beach late at night and poured libations of kava into the sand, thus intentionally causing Jacob's illness. In the second instance, a healer described a tall, dark ancestor who wanted us out of the *bure*. For many nights, I would look up into the cross-beams of our *bure* and try not to see this figure looming over us. Even though my common sense told me to ignore all this, I must admit, I felt fearful: if not of the malevolent ancestor then of the small group of villagers who wanted to make my child ill. I had two offers of healing and at this point I was open to all options. A healer massaged Jacob with coconut oil for about twenty minutes to get the 'cold' out of him. This was not an entirely pleasant experience for Jacob and he cried when she rubbed too vigorously. Some friends also offered to do some charismatic healing for Jacob. We were taken to the church at around 10 at night. After a long and (for me) a strange night, I woke early to take him to the hospital on the 6am bus. After a night on a drip in hospital, he was discharged and I brought him back to the village where, remarkably, he slowly regained weight without the need for any medication. There were many times during his illness though when I felt like simply packing my bags and going home.

For the most part, Matt was the ideal, uncomplaining husband and father. However, near the end he, understandably, couldn't wait to go home to New Zealand. He had never imagined that he would be playing such a significant role in parenting, and parenting in such a different and challenging environment was twice as hard as parenting at home in New Zealand. I would have preferred to have conducted my fieldwork alone so that I didn't constantly feel responsible for the safety and happiness of my family. But life does not always pan out that way. I *was* a wife and mother and I *could* not and *cannot* extricate my researcher self from my other selves as wife and mother (Cupples & Kindon, 2003, p. 223) whether my family accompany me into the field or not. Narayan (1993) and others have argued that this hybrid identity creates its own tensions. For me, it was a constant tight rope of maintaining a partnership and being a good mother while trying to attain research excellence (see Hendry 1992). While there were many wonderful times for our family I have not mentioned here,

and that the good by far outweighed the bad, the point I wanted to make in this presentation was that I did feel a pull toward my family and away from the research when things got tough. Somewhat paradoxically, in the end, while lone researching may not have carried such weighty responsibilities, it was *only* with the support of my research companions (as you can see from my photos, this also included friends in the field) that I *could* finally successfully achieve the balance I sought. In other words, since I *was* a wife/mother/researcher, I could *not* have successfully conducted research alone.