



# Mental Welfare in The Field: A neglected subject?

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By Marcus Jordan

The time is 7 in the morning, and it is yet another long day of my fieldwork. Now all I need to do before moving on to the day, as I say to myself each morning, is write up yesterday's field notes and get ready to leave. After all, isn't fieldwork the greatest thing ever?

Listening to my supervisors, I couldn't help but think how interesting their fieldwork sounded. There was the work on local democracy and participation, and there was the study on politics within the "Greater Middle East." The stories of successes and comedic encounters, combined with anecdotes of local culture, filled my imagination and made me yearn for my own similar experiences.



*Now, I am in the field.* When I step outside each day and walk down my street, filled with cars and storefronts, I see sights one would find anywhere else: young people spending time together, professionals rushing to work, and grocers minding their wares. At 7 am, the coffee shops will be soon occupied by businessmen, politicians, and bureaucrats, and the news outlets will be coming out with their latest stories of political intrigue and international animosity.



*This is it, this is the moment I've been waiting for.* It's time to get out of bed and move on with the day. However, no matter how hard I try, I can't stop thinking about the tasks I have to accomplish today. Reminding myself that I must concentrate on the here and now, my thoughts then involuntarily turn to other aspects of my fieldwork. Have I met enough people who could become informants? Why haven't this person and I seen each other after first meeting a



month ago?

*Am I just perpetuating the same colonial power-structures which I despise? Is my year here, in this ambiguous place, merely in vain?*

And the thoughts go on and on. An hour passes and I am still in the same position I had been in since I officially woke up. I feel exhausted from the still-happening mental roller-coaster, and I wonder how I will function today after having been “puttering around,” as my grandfather used to say, for the past sixty minutes.



Of course, it would be quite convenient to just blame the stress on myself, on my own laziness and unwillingness to get moving. That’s what the “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” discourse does, right? And to be fair, it is true that I have not been getting as much sleep as I should and my schedule could be more regular.

Additionally, less than 4 months in, I am still gaining more familiarity with the culture. Things are different here, and I shouldn’t expect myself to understand many cultural meanings immediately, for example. A thick fog blocks my access to so many parts of this setting, and I cannot possibly understand more of it until I have spent more time here.

To remedy this situation, I have, for example, consulted my supervisors and restructured my schedule in order to allow myself both more time in the field and time for myself. I also tell myself that one of the best remedies for internal fieldwork confusion is to just keep at it, and I try to remind myself that I am making progress, however, slight it may seem.



However, this article is not just a convenient, anonymous opportunity for me to broadcast my personal stress to the Internet. I also do not seek to duplicate [Jessica Tremblay's post](#) which describes 10 means of "surviving fieldwork." Rather, I seek to highlight the issue of the anthropologist's mental welfare and how it affects the discipline. Simply put, stress of the type depicted here results from the researcher's own body being their primary research instrument. The researcher's mental welfare then directly affects their ability to conduct their methods, making the topic of stress during fieldwork a crucial, yet overlooked, area of discussion.

While conducting fieldwork, there persists a pressure to be among informants as much as possible due to the researcher having a limited amount of time to spend before returning home. While this pressure encourages the researcher to be active within their host community, it can also lead to the perception that time spent away from apart is wasted. As [Charis Boke writes](#), it is incredible difficult to separate between "fieldwork mode" and "real mode," and the end result seems to be a) feeling like a spy, with all the associated guilt, and b) constantly reflecting on work, to the detriment of the self. There is then a substantial amount of pressure on the anthropologist due to their own body often being used as the primary research tool.

*Indeed, what happens if we, all alone in the field, just can't keep moving? In the age of Facebook and email, we can contact our supervisors and colleagues, but there is still a stigma surrounding mental health. Some might think that, as anthropologists, we should be able to tough it out, and, if we can't, we shouldn't*





*be anthropologists.*

Anxiety and depression are things to be ashamed of, needs for personal space are professional shortcomings, and introversion is less of a personality trait and more of a societal problem. Within such an environment, one may wonder whether it is in the fieldworker's best interests to fully disclose or keep silent, suffering alone. Does the [\[isolation\] described by Chris Diming](#) extend beyond observation and into academic practices?

Unfortunately, it appears that anthropology, a discipline often noted for its concern with the welfare of informants, neglects its own. Very little from textbooks I have read or seminars I have attended has prepared me for the sheer amount of pressure which "being there" brings upon me. The lecture I audited on fieldwork methods only briefly covered the various stages of fieldwork, while the sole, lonely mention of mental health during a first-year PhD seminar referred to the availability of the university's counseling office. Similarly, Watson's introduction to *Being There*, an acknowledged preparatory text, highlights feelings of unease among beginning anthropologists as the reason for the volume's publication, while simultaneously glossing over the issues of stress and mental health as they appear in practice. Broader attitudes towards mental health, such as those described in the previous paragraph, combine with the discursive neglect of mental welfare within the discipline to create a situation which, for the struggling fieldworker, becomes increasingly difficult to withstand.



Trapped, their concerns are silenced by hegemony's morose embrace as they are paralyzed between the daily demands of their fieldsites and anthropology's indifference. Consequently, the anthropologist's relationships with informants can become threatened, as feelings of fatigue and disillusion lead to irritability or worse, and dilemmas faced during the course of fieldwork may be resolved less than ethically. Furthermore, the quality of ethnographies produced under such conditions may decrease. Thus, anthropology, in glossing over the topic of mental health, risks simultaneously the quality of its efforts, the welfare of informants, and the well-being of its practitioners.



The hardship I have experienced is not limited to myself and reflects how anthropology regards its practitioners' mental welfare. To remedy this situation, the discipline should acknowledge that it has a collective responsibility for the well-being of its ethnographers, because the problem of fieldwork stress endangers both informants and the discipline itself.

*Rather than being left for university-run counseling services, mental health and stress need to be discussed directly and openly within anthropology for any substantial relief to be experienced by those in the field.*

## Works Cited

Watson, C.W., 1999. "Introduction: The Quality of Being There," in C. Watson, ed. *Being There: Fieldwork in Anthropology*. London: Pluto Press, pp. 1-24.