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What Changed?

Post-Pandemic Fieldwork, Mental Health and Academic Support

Fig. 1 Illustration generated with AI in response to the themes discussed in this post.

“Well, I think the entire research process – including the preparation and follow-up – is one big emotional balancing act because you have to take care of yourself during that time.“ The reflection by one of my informants offers insight into feelings, experiences, and the effects on body, mind, and wellbeing. The student was a participant in my research study 2023/2024, which focused on affect and trauma in the field context among M.A.-students. The idea to explore mental health

consequences of fieldwork and insufficient mental health support offered by universities, originates from self-reflections made before, during, and after my B.A.-fieldwork 2013 in the Andaman and Nicobar Island in India. I experienced quite early in the project preparation, how academic performance pressure triggered personal anxieties and strained my mental and physical wellbeing. The rather disturbing part of the observation was the utter institutional silence in class or elsewhere regarding possible affect and trauma in the field. There was no single mention of or reference about students´ mental health even after field return, let alone information where to find university support.

The M.A.-fieldwork (2023/2024) is a follow up with focus on fieldwork setting in post-pandemic times, mental health through students´ lens, and academic support. I wanted to understand the multilayered influences in the field context on researchers´ health as the project progressed. The design, conduct and data evaluation involved one and a half years of deep engagement with the field. My interview partners experienced this period, from beginning to end, as energy draining and exhausting. In the long run the task demanded genuine motivation, dedication, stamina and resilience from them, silently and substantially outrunning academic performance.

Drawing on my own experience, I distinguish three phases of fieldwork: the pre-field, in-field, or post-field phase to help me to examine and understand the field as a precarious space for researchers. The pre-field phase involved identifying a research topic and questions, selecting a field site and informants, reviewing relevant literature, and presenting the research topic and concepts in class. The interplay of field intensity, duration and research related problems in combination with personal issues resulted in some cases in rapid downfall of informants´ mental health upon field arrival.

In the second phase, from field arrival to field departure, students faced hurdles like, financial fluidity, feeling time pressure, disease and hospital stay abroad, Corona

outbreak in the field, as well as sexual assault (mostly for female researchers). Along came worries about finding accommodation and field access, applying constructive coping mechanisms, or being forced to abort the project altogether. The academic hassle in-field, was heightened by the back-and-forth between project related adversities and personal burdens. The constant performance pressure led to another wave of mental health decline.

The final segment of fieldwork is the post-field phase, defined by field return. Informants experienced homecoming as a culture shock, which involved prolonged episodes of problematic re-integration into homeland society. Academic and personal concerns included financial stress as well as time and study pressure. An interviewee mentioned data evaluation, in specific transcription and coding, as a cause for emotional difficulties, since the process forced a re-living of field moments. The re-activation of field memory felt overwhelming, further triggering affective and traumatic memories of past life experiences along with old behavioral patterns. Project participants who were, at that point in time, not in therapy organised or try to organise immediate psychological support to relieve burnout symptoms and to stay fit to finish the degree.

Post-pandemic Fieldwork and Mental Health

Research on trauma usually focuses on extreme events such as violence, disasters, or war (Bride and Figley 2003). Most students in the field do not face these directly. However, post-pandemic fieldwork does take place against a backdrop of wars, environmental disasters, and economic crises, which can disrupt travel and add to the uncertainty of an already demanding process. Regardless of the global context, the data captured a local Mental Health Paradox. Established on a university survey done during the Corona outbreak in Germany, the result clearly showed a serious rise in students' mental health stress, however there was no equal rise in consultation requests. The expert I interviewed assumed a lack of awareness of university support networks and crisis response centers among students. When I

fact checked the assumption among my informants, most of them responded with having less to none information about support networks or crisis response centers of their respective university.

Despite help from their partners, families, friends, colleagues, or faculty members, a large portion emphasized the importance of professional psychological support, when asked about past life experiences, current wellbeing, and specific field experiences. However, due to lack of mental health information, none of my project participants sought aid from that university care infrastructure. The paradox shows, how insufficient awareness of academic support in pandemic and post-pandemic times can undermine crisis response, when actually needed by the academic community.

Emotionally and traumatically challenging situations of post-pandemic fieldwork are not limited to the Mental Health Paradox. They interconnect with other variables like transcription and coding, which are scientific methods used for data evaluation. The transcription technique produces written text from audio and video recordings, while coding allows analysis of recurring themes within and from the text. The process creates a mind space where field impressions become alive and collide unhinged with personal memories of past life. One of my informants described the confrontation with data in the context of transcription and coding as emotionally challenging. The re-organisation of research material for better overview and further examination caused repetitive crying attacks and drained a lot of energy over the course of the evaluation period. Emotional, mental and physical gravity influenced the whole process, causing breaks and delays. The case example exposes, how data processing takes students willingly or unwillingly, further back down memory lane, triggering emotions, affects and trauma expressed psychosomatic.

The practice of fieldwork holds, even post-field, the potential to activate and/or re-activate old and new emotions, trauma and behavioral patterns. The intensity and duration of academic pressure coupled with personal anxieties can manifest chronic

(mental) health issues. One prominent case study of cognitive dissonance, discussed by Ruth Ayaß, is the father of anthropology Bronislaw Malinowski. His famous work "Argonauts of the the Western Pacific" was published 1922, and his diaries almost 25 years after his death in 1967. Even if, the ethnographer insisted on a categorically articulated methodological approach to everyday ethnographic life, he kept human feelings like, homesickness, self-doubt, loneliness, irritability and annoyance hidden and outside of the field (Ayaß 2016).

Present day literature critically discusses, how most methodological insights and (self-) reflections are either made in-field or in retrospect/post-field. Internal processes, like thinking, feeling or hurting are biochemical reactions registered in the sensory system, which become embodied experience. To Karen Saakvitne, coping an overwhelming and unbearable experience in the light of maintaining one´s own capabilities requires emotional tolerance, and sense of connection with others. If the help is not present, so the clinical psychologist, the need for and use of dissociative and amnesic defense mechanisms becomes crucial to exclude or prevent conscious processing of the event (Saakvitne 1998). So, how can academic crisis respond look like?

Academic Support

Based on the outcome of my case study, one solution consisted of a university survey to gather knowledge via data. The insight allowed a more practical approach to systemic problems like lack of awareness of university support. A joint effort between university support networks and crisis response centers led to the enlargement of the existing care infrastructure. This meant in practical terms the introduction of new mental health initiatives at university and institutional level, which include low-threshold consultations, in person or online, on campus or from the field and Mental Health Infodays and Awareness Weeks once per semester. It also means raising awareness among teaching staff and study coordinators, so they can refer students to psychological support. The programs came rather late into

existence for many of my informants, who were already writing their master thesis. My informants may have lacked knowledge about university support network due to non-existent promotion, yet all of them had for various reasons and long before organised not-university related psychological support. The rest looking for therapy post-field equally sought professional help, due to insufficient information, outside of the university. However, all project participants independent of their traumatic experiences and life backgrounds were without exception willing to go all out for their respective projects. They all understood field struggles as a part of the learning lesson.

References

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Smitha Muttanoly holds an M.A. in Social and Cultural Anthropology from the Freie Universität Berlin (2025). Her M.A. thesis examined affect, trauma, and mental health among anthropology students before, during and after fieldwork. She studied at LMU Munich, where her B.A. fieldwork in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (2013) focused on migration, identity, ethnicity, and resettlement among the Mappila community. The intense research sparked her interest in health and wellbeing. Before turning to anthropology, she trained and worked as a medical assistant. A postgraduate study is pursued currently abroad.