"It's Not in the Course Guide!" Reflections from a Dutch Field School on How Students Learn to Do Fieldwork

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In this reflection we unpack students' first fieldwork experiences and how this parallels a rite de passage. We do so in two domains: (1) students' first fieldwork with a focus on entering the field, staying in the field, and researcher identity; and (2) the impact of fieldwork experiences on students' professional skills. Two struggles are prominent: letting go of the idea of "objectivity" and learning to deal with the whimsicalities of doing fieldwork. [ethnography, field methods, first fieldwork, *rites de passage*, teaching anthropology]

In this reflection, we unpack the different dimensions of students' first fieldwork experiences with the aim to provide insights in learning experiences related to the "core business" of anthropology: fieldwork. First fieldwork experiences often follow the scheme of a *rite de passage*: separation (in this case, inspired by Durel [1993, 223], understood as a separation from their status as students and being socially disengaged), a period of liminality (the ambiguous threshold at which the person undergoes transition), and the integration as a new person (the person is reunited with the group as a new member; Van Gennep 1960). For students, becoming a fieldworker is a key aspect in their development toward their professional lives. Many of them will eventually find work in an (international) NGO, a governmental institution, or at the university—professional spaces that often involve conducting fieldwork.

Students often have liminal experiences during their first fieldwork: old configurations of certainty and identity are no longer present, and new configurations are not in place yet (Turner 1967). In this phase, we argue in this reflection, students' feelings of being "betwixt and between" circle around three facets of doing fieldwork: entering the field, staying in the field, and researcher identity. We show that in these three facets, two struggles are transversal: first, students have to let go of the idea of "objectivity," and second, they need to allow themselves to surrender to the serendipities that are part of doing fieldwork. In this article we explore how students experience these tensions during a field school that is part of the International Development Studies program at a Dutch university. The specifics of this course (discussed in the next section) mean that this field school is not generalizable to other field schools. However, as students move out of their comfort zones, we contend that as a "first fieldwork experience," the field school can provide insights into how students experience and manage such first experiences in the field and the role of supervisors in this process.

Although doing fieldwork is at the heart of anthropology, there is surprisingly little literature on how to teach and learn it. For a long time the "sink or swim" approach

was considered the only way to learn how to do fieldwork (Levine et al. 1980; Wallace 1999, 210). The assumption seemed to be that "one could do fieldwork or one could not" (Anderson 1989, 2), and therefore, many anthropologists did not receive any practical training on how to do fieldwork. As a consequence, "doing fieldwork" was surrounded by a certain mystique (Raybeck 1996). Several authors confirm that they did not receive any training in how to write field notes (Jackson 1990). This lack of methodological procedures forced, as Freilich (1970) describes, anthropologists to resort to their own "personal devices," a necessity that was turned into a virtue (Freilich 1970, 14).

Although today several universities offer ethnographic field schools, there is relatively little literature that describes how these field schools work. Levine et al. (1980) describe how they teach participant observation, and Sanjek (1990) was the first to discuss "fieldnote practices." The work of McCurdy et al. (2004) contains overviews of methodology courses and fieldwork exercises. Although this literature provides an interesting impression of how students learn to do fieldwork and the role of supervisors in this process, it leaves untouched students' experiences of "separation" and "liminality."

As an ethnographic analysis of how students learn how to do fieldwork, the contribution of this reflection to the broader field of anthropology and education is two sided. First, it provides for an analysis of how field methods can be taught; it is an ethnographic study on how doing fieldwork is learned. In the literature about anthropology and education, the education *of anthropologists* is almost absent (Taddei & Gamboggi 2016). Second, on a more practical level, this reflection adds to the literature on how to teach field methods. Our contribution to the literature on learning how to do fieldwork is that we look at how "teaching field methods" actually takes place and, most importantly, how students perceive such field schools and learn from them. Although we do so in relation to a specific field school, it provides more general insights into how students experience first fieldwork experiences and how they can be guided through this process.

Our analysis is based on seven years of teaching the subject. The first author of this paper started to teach the course in 2011. The other authors have participated in the course ranging from one to four times. We have analyzed course materials, students' evaluation forms (2012–2018), and students' written reflections. The heart of the material are eighteen interviews that we conducted from October 2015 until February 2016. The interviews were carried out with students who had done the Field Research Practical in the years 2013, 2014, and 2015. The interviews covered students' experiences during the Field Research Practical, using a semistructured interview guide for each interview. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Through a process of thematic analysis, the central themes were established, these are the topics that form the body of this paper. In order to protect the identity of the former students, the names that appear in this text are pseudonyms.

Context and Course Description

The Field Research Practical takes place at the end of the second study year of the bachelor program. Its duration—four weeks—is framed by programmatic limitations. The student population is predominantly Dutch, white, and female, although over the years we have welcomed more male students. In addition, there is always a small group of German students, who are attracted by the bachelor-level International Development Studies program, which does not exist in Germany. Further internationalization is limited, because the first two years of the bachelor program are offered in Dutch.

The main objective of the course is to let students experience the research process—from research design, via the actual fieldwork (two weeks in Ireland or England), to reporting

on findings—within the relatively safe environment of the field school. Students complete a fieldwork assignment (interviewing, conducting participant observation, making field notes) while living with a host family. After this period of doing fieldwork, the students return to The Netherlands and write their research report. Hence, it is quite a packed program, a pressure cooker so to say. Students enter without any fieldwork experience, and when they come out, they have learned how to prepare for, conduct, as well as report on, field research.

The main task of the supervisors is to guide students through the insecurities and serendipities of fieldwork. This happens through social interaction, building rapport, and reflexivity; ethnographic practices that are turned into teaching tools. Supervisor–student interaction starts during the first workshop of the course and then evolves further through individual field visits, e-mail contact, Whatsapp, and phone calls. As such, supervisors gradually build rapport with "their" students. Mutual trust is necessary to be able to discuss more personal issues that arise during fieldwork, such as homesickness, shyness, fears, or even depression. Supervisors also facilitate the process of reflexivity during their field visits to the students. In addition, students are challenged to reflect on their positionality in the field in their midterm paper as well as final report.

Supervisors apply these teaching tools in a liminal threshold, in which the students wend outside their comfort zones. After Zembylas & Boler (2003), we understand comfort zones as "the inscribed emotional and cultural terrains that we occupy less by choice and more by virtue of hegemony." Outside their comfort zones, but within the safe space of interaction with the supervisor, students are encouraged to question their "cherished beliefs and assumptions" (Boler 1999 in Zembylas 2015), in this case about objectivity, fieldwork identities, and their position in the field. All students, notwithstanding ethnic identity, religious background, and gender, are actively invited to move out of their comfort zone and to reflect on how they experience this. Doing fieldwork for the first time is discomforting. In line with Zembylas (2015), we believe that this creates openings for individual transformations, in this specific case the transformation from "armchair student" to "fieldworker." During the Field Research Practical, like in other ethnographic field schools, the circumstances under which this transformation takes place are more controlled—the university takes care of the travel logistics, organizes the homestay with a host family, provides intensive supervision and supervisors that know the region, among many other things—but still the students move out of their comfort zone and have to surrender to, and deal with, the serendipities and whimsicalities of doing fieldwork. This can be understood as "an experience" that is formative as well as transformative (Turner 1986, 35).

First Fieldwork Experiences

Entering the Field

The preparatory methodology course that students follow builds on the idea that good preparation is key to field research. Attention is paid to the importance of a solid research design, the operationalization of research questions, and how to introduce yourself in the field. Although good fieldwork preparations are key (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007), the students are also coached towards being able to handle "the unexpected," being flexible, and relying on the fact that some things depend on serendipity.

Four to five weeks before going to England or Ireland, students are linked to a host family. They contact their families by email, phone, or social media. Students can get

nervous about taking this first step, finding it awkward to contact people they do not know. It seems particularly uncomfortable to pick up the phone when host families do not have Facebook or an email address (or do not respond to it): "I have talked to them on the phone before [we took off to Ireland] but I could not understand a single word," is a frequently heard remark. At the same time, contact prior to arriving with the host family can produce feelings of safety.

In the field, living with a host family is an important part of being separated from student life. Martine, for example, remembers how she admired how her host family had created a "safe heaven" in the middle of nowhere, living with six people, dogs, and cats in a very small house in rural Ireland with only one hour of hot water every day. It was living in this family and in these unknown conditions that made it "an experience" for her. The same goes for Emily, but the other way around. The most difficult part of her fieldwork was to live with her host family, as she "could not identify with the way they lived." Although it was a close-knit family, she saw them as indifferent toward each other. She had difficulty understanding how they would not "make more out of it" and were eating and watching television at the same time. Often students are more worried beforehand about the host family than about the research itself. Or, as Lieve said: "I was prepared for the research, I knew that was going to be fine, but the host family … I mean, you have to be able to get along" (Interview Lieve, November 4, 2015).

In both England and Ireland, host families are contacted by and through partner organizations (Roscommon Leader in Ireland and Devon Communities in England) and are briefed about the activities that students will undertake in the field. Some hosts have participated for several years, and new hosts are often recommended by existing hosts and are therefore well-informed about the daily undertakings of the students. The way host families support students' activities, however, might differ. Some host families leave the students alone during the day with a prepared meal to find their own way in the community, while others start making phone calls to arrange interviews for the students on day one. Both have their own challenges; students with over-active hosts have to work hard to make their research their own, defend the way they want to do it, and not only interview the people known by the host. Students who are left alone might feel a little lost at times and may need more guidance from their supervisor. In the past eight years, there has been one case in which we had to find a new host for a student because of a conflict between the host and the student. In such cases, the support of the supervisor is important, as is the reflection on how this shaped the students' fieldwork experience.

After the first encounter with their host family, often followed by doing grocery shopping, having tea and dinner, and a tour of the near surroundings, students start what they consider their "real" fieldwork activities. This means entering the research field and moving out of their (new) comfort zone. In so doing, they start to experience feeling "betwixt and between." They have to do things they normally do not do: talk to people they do not know and engage in (social) activities related to their research. This makes most students insecure, but it also pushes them to explore their boundaries. Lillian for example says:

> I'm a social person, but not extremely good at it. Now I just had to say something to the person next to me in church in order to make contact and have dinner and drink coffee with people you don't know at all! (Interview Lilian, November 10, 2015).

Engaging in this other, and at times discomforting, everyday life, is crucial in the separation from their status as "student." Hence, students enter the process of building rapport and relating to the Other through what Stephens would call "making oneself a good

neighbour" (Stephens 2014). In line with Stephens we consider that students can learn a lot through "neighborliness." The category of the neighbor transcends other social categories, such as job title or social status, in the service of a more direct relationship with others based on care, compassion, and respect (Stephens 2014, following Ricoeur 1965).

Supervisors coach students through this process of feeling betwixt and between on the one hand, and building rapport outside the comfort zone on the other through field visits during the first days in the field. During the field visits, supervisors and students go through the field log, in which students keep track of all their activities. In case of shyness or anxiety to leave the house, the supervisor might take the students outside and actually engage in informal conversations with research participants to demonstrate how informal contacts can be made.

Staying Out: Actively Engaging with the Ethnographic Field [or: interaction angst]

After mapping their surroundings and having a few informal conversations during the first days of fieldwork, students have to take the step towards doing interviews, more focused participant observation, or developing a survey. For some students, engaging with the ethnographic field is challenging. We have called this phenomenon "interaction angst." Interaction angst can have many different reasons such as being afraid to consume research participants' time, experiencing a culture shock, being homesick, being shy or insecure, or enduring negative experiences in the field. An example of how interaction angst can hamper fieldwork is illustrated by the case of Erik:

> Erik studied the relation between sports and social relations/capital. As the fieldwork evolved it became clear that he had trouble getting in touch with people. During a second field visit I took him to the sports' fields and by just greeting and chatting with the young people playing soccer and basketball, I hoped to show him how easy it can be to make contact. But I could feel his resistance against crossing that line. My final attempt was when we walked through town and came by table tennis tables that could be used freely. I suggested that this could be a way to meet people informally, but, I said, if he found that difficult, also a place where some direct observation could be done without interacting with people. As he nodded I sensed that I would probably not find any descriptions of social interactions around the table tennis tables in his final report. (field notes, Field Research Practical, 2015)

Other students show a proactive attitude in overcoming interaction angst, like Thomas, who did research on the role of the police in the perception of safety in a small town in England:

> Casting the web of research wider, I developed what I called the "yes-man technique," which meant I had to go with and follow up on any new opportunity that came my way. I had to be proactive to become a researcher!' (Interview Thomas, October 27, 2015)

In a few cases, "interaction angst" manifests itself in a later stage because of negative experiences in the field. In the past eight years, there have been two cases of sexual intimidation that we know of, which have resulted in students being hesitant in approaching research participants.

In all such cases, supervisors can do a lot in guiding the student through the "interaction angst" and uncertainty by way of asking, talking, reflecting, or actually conducting fieldwork in front of the students. In some cases, however, the "interaction angst" extends itself to the supervisor–student relationship. In such cases there might not be enough rapport between the student and the supervisor. Although the supervisors are all very

dedicated to the course, there are always cases in which there might not be a personal click. Combined with a strong "interaction angst", this may result in non-finalized research reports. Students are, then, not incorporated as a new person into the academic field.

Negotiating Personal and Fieldwork Identities: Me the Researcher versus Me [Name]

Feeling betwixt and between is further informed by struggles over personal and researcher identities in the process of making oneself a neighbor. The tension between personal and researcher identities comes to the fore when students reflect on their research methods. Although we teach about the limitations of interviews as a method in the preparatory course, all students point out that the hardest part was doing participant observation, resonating with the vast literature on the challenges of participant observation as a method (see, among others, DeWalt and DeWalt 2011). In this part of doing research, the line between "me Lillian/Martine/Emily" and "me the researcher" becomes blurred. Although students find it scary to do interviews and/or to ask people to be interviewed, it feels safer, because their role is clear: they ask the questions and control the interview. In participant observation, their roles become fuzzy. Most students find it difficult to balance distance and interaction, and are afraid that their research will not be "objective" enough when they interact too much. Lillian notes that it sometimes felt as if she was betraying people, doing friendly things partly because of the research. It would have been easier for her, she says, if she could have just observed more from a distance. Sometimes they cannot fully enjoy the participant observation, like Sofie: "I had to be so alert, I was so afraid of missing out on something that I could not really be in the moment itself" (Interview Sofie, November 24, 2015).

Because students are often focused on the separation of personal and professional identities, it can take a while before they experience that informal conversations can lead to valuable research contacts and information related to their research questions. The way this happens often resonates the idea of "play" as discussed by Ricoeur (1981) and Turner (1986), and applied by Stephens (2014). Stephens follows Ricoeur's and Turner's idea of play as something that is transformative and takes place in the subjunctive (liminal) phase (Stephens 2014). Play, then, reveals something to us. It is through playing that students build up rapport, make themselves neighbors, and can eventually overcome the tensions between personal and professional identities. For example, numerous students, to their own surprise, found out that having a pint with locals provided them new contacts as well as valuable information. Jacob recalls what happened when he decided to go to the pub with his host father and his brother:

> It was there, after our first pint of Guinness, that they told me that they were happy to see I was all right because they had actually started to wonder whether anything was wrong with me, going to my room reading books and listening to music, who does that? Certainly not a real man! I actually started telling jokes, you know, these really bad ones that I don't even like and feel really ashamed about it, but they liked it and we got along. (Interview Jacob, October 28, 2015)

In the preparatory course about field research methods, students learn about different forms of reflexivity as a way of dealing with the way researcher and personal identities can conflate. During field visits, supervisors talk extensively with students about how their (partial) identities shape the ways they (can) do research and how their methods relate and are relevant to their research questions. In addition, students reflect on their positionality and methodology in three written reflections. Still, along with a perceived clear distinction between researcher and personal identity, students also find it difficult to

recognize how their positionality influenced their findings. Lillian, who did research on social networks in the church, was very confident: "No, it didn't matter at all that I was also a Christian when I did my research in church" (Interview Lilian, November 10, 2015). Emily, doing research on gender relations only reluctantly said: "Well… maybe it was a little easier," (Interview Emily, October 28, 2015) when asked whether her being a girl had influenced the way her research on motherhood developed.

From "Armchair Student" to Fieldworker: The Incorporation of the New Person

> "Unforgettable"; "This whole course is just the best course of the bachelor"; "I really learned a lot from it"; "This course really changed my life"; "I think this is the most important learning experience for everybody".

These are just a few quotes that we collected from interviews and course evaluations that show how the Field Research Practical impacted the (professional) lives of students. After having experienced feeling betwixt and between during the two weeks of fieldwork and gradually taking more distance during and after writing their research reports, they have been incorporated as a "new person" (Van Gennep 1960) in academic and professional life; they now belong to that particular community that has completed fieldwork (Raybeck 1996, 14). As "incorporated persons" they have acquired new skills and experienced what "doing field research" entails. They are able to face difficult and, at times, unsettling situations outside their comfort zone. This not only shaped them as persons, it also had effect on how they, after completing their fieldwork, were perceived by others.

Many of the things that students reflect on as transformative in their learning experience are not tangible but rather related to social skills and personal development. Those are the social skills that are needed to build rapport and cope with unexpected fieldwork situations. Lieve, for example, underscores that what she learned was that it is important to, "keep talking in order to gain trust, even though it is not about the research" (Interview Lieve, November 4, 2015). Eva adds to this that it was important for her to learn how to move around with people and that it is extremely important to set the first step yourself. Doing fieldwork, students experience, requires a great amount of flexibility and independence. The everyday practice of being in the field, being a "good neighbor" and building rapport, and not being able to fully control daily fieldwork practicalities help students acquire these capabilities.

In doing so, students learn that it works to step outside their comfort zones and that this is important to the research process. Like Sofie, who says not to remember the theoretical things she was taught during the course but that the practical learning experience is that "you just know what to do in fieldwork situations and that you know how to step outside your comfort zone" (Interview Sofie, November 24, 2015). The same goes for Emily, who did her fieldwork in circumstances that were quite different from what she had anticipated. She was forced out of her comfort zone all the time while staying at a host family whose way of living she did not understand. At first she kept on thinking "What kind of family is this? Why do they live this way?" After a brief period of resisting the situation, she learned to see that she would have to respect how these people lived, even though she could not identify with them. Then she found out they had lost a lot of money the past few years, and she learned how being understanding was a way of building rapport with her host family, and that being friendly and respectful was important in doing so. Leaving

the comfort zone allows students to "fit in" and become a neighbor. These "discomforting situations" encourage them to question what they find normal (Coulter et al. 2013).

In addition to developing social skills that make it possible for them to build rapport with their research participants and deal with difficult fieldwork situations, students also learn about themselves as persons. Lieve remembers how she'd thought: "ah research, I can do that," and then she turned out to be less direct in the field than she normally is. Reflecting on this, she says: "you can never know how you react in the field" (Interview Lieve, November 4, 2015). Eva expressed a similar thing:

> it really struck me, how you run into yourself, there are things you cannot think of before you go. One day, a priest came over for a visit, and he was shouting really loud. I don't know why, and it was never really explained either. Due to this situation, I felt disconnected from my surroundings and my host family. I knew I had to be strong at that moment, but it really scared me. (Interview Eva, October 25, 2015)

Students are often confronted and challenged by the ways in which they are (un)able to use their social skills in the same ways as they do at home. For some students, the field school is a very stressful and too-unsettling experience. As we discussed in the former section, some students may suffer from interaction angst in the field for various reasons. Often these students conclude that "fieldwork is not their thing," and that they would rather work with, for example, big data sets from behind the computer. Still, most of these students still find the field school a meaningful experience, because they found out more about their skills, preferences, and qualities.

Students often say that they learned several technical, more measurable skills from the course. These skills are very much linked to the learning outcomes "design a field research and formulate research questions" and "use various exploratory research techniques." They appreciate this because, in the words of many, "finally we learn to do practical things." Concretely, students find it important that they were taught beforehand how to set up an interview, how to write field notes, as well as the importance of organizing field materials, how to formulate research questions, and how to link empirical findings to a theoretical framework. At large, students express that they have learned how important it is to organize and to think ahead.

All students see the writing of the research report as a great accomplishment, although it is a stressful one. It is the first time that they write a research report using their own field materials. The process of analyzing their findings and translating those into a research report is challenging. In many cases students feel disoriented and isolated, notwithstanding the intensive daily supervision throughout the writing week. Lieve remembers: "Here you're really on your own, normally you just write something, that's always a smaller thing but this is your own research!" (Interview Lieve, November 4, 2015). Whereas students are used to discussing course literature and assignments with other students, they now have the responsibility to mold their *own* fieldwork data into a readable report. They are the experts on their topic. Many students see the research report as a marker of successfully finishing their research project, as a demonstration, so to say, of their accomplishment as fieldworkers. The transformation they have undergone is also noticed by others. For example, for future supervisors, this experience might be essential to allowing them into next research projects on the master level, for which they need fieldwork experience. For the same reason, many students consider the Field Research Practical to have more impact than the writing of the literature review-based BSc thesis.

What all these different learning experiences boil down to is that the Field Research Practical is not only about the practice of doing research, but also about being able to handle unexpected and difficult fieldwork situations in a setting that is unfamiliar and at times discomforting. Next to expressing a more general trust in knowing what to do when being abroad and how to make your way in an unknown environment, some students see the practical as a good preparation for their master thesis. Lillian, for example, shares how happy she is to know, now that she is going to prepare her thesis, that although it can be difficult to do interviews and to find research participants, it always turns out well because she now knows what doing fieldwork is about. Barbara also considers her experience in Ireland as a good preparation for her thesis: she is happy to know how much she actually likes doing research.

Many students maintain relations with their host families and their fieldwork sites. Some students go back on holidays to Ireland and England, sometimes together with their "real" parents. In almost all cases they remain in touch via Facebook or Whatsapp, and although this might dry out after a couple of years, they continue to speak in a loving and caring way about their host families. Equally, host families remember the students they've hosted throughout the years and often ask whether the supervisors are still in touch with them.

In sum, students, as newly incorporated persons, not only know how to do research, but they also know how to make themselves at home in a context that was formerly unknown to them: they have learned how to go about "discomforting situations," whether this is for research, a student exchange, or a job in another country. They also come to see themselves as researchers, as Thomas remarks when reflecting on his possible role for the community: "I could see that we could contribute to a community blog or a Facebook site about what we do as *researchers*" (Interview Thomas, October 27, 2015). Although supervisors play an important role in providing feedback on chapters and draft versions, most students remember this process as something they completed on their own. This is, we think, partly due to the more distanced relationship between student and supervisor after having been working intensely together in the field.

Some Final Reflections

In this reflection we unpacked the different dimensions of students' first fieldwork experiences. In so doing, we approached the first fieldwork as a *rite de passage* toward becoming a fieldworker (Raybeck 1996, 14). The significance of this *rite de passage* is, as we have demonstrated, that students take another step towards their future professional lives, in which they will, in line with their education, likely fulfill roles as fieldworkers. Although they, as non-anthropology students, would not frame or actively experience the Field Research Practical as a *rite de passage*, they often do see it as a transformative period. We explored two struggles that are at the core of feeling betwixt and between, and manifest themselves as transversal during the process of learning to do fieldwork: letting go of the idea of an objective truth and learning to surrender to the whimsicalities and serendipities of doing fieldwork. These struggles are discomforting and encourage the students to let go of their pre-inscribed ideas about research and, sometimes, about themselves. Awareness about how this impacts students' experiences of their first fieldwork can help supervisors give form to their supervision.

The first struggle, wanting to be objective and finding "the truth out there." makes it difficult for students to engage in more informal relations with research participants and build rapport. For the same reason students may be focused on the number of interviews

they conduct and find it difficult to see the value of participant observation, which is considered less "controllable" and "measurable." This is closely linked to the second struggle, related to the serendipity of fieldwork. Central to this struggle is that students experience difficulties controlling the new situations and localities they find themselves in; there are things you just cannot anticipate. Students have to prepare for the unexpected—it's not in the course guide! —and they find that very challenging. During the Field Research Practical, this can result in difficulties in relating to the field and in meeting and asking people to be interviewed. Not knowing what can happen or how people will react can be paralyzing. In such cases, students often find it easier to keep observing from a distance and long for a research method that allows them to be more anonymous.

These experiences of feeling betwixt and between in discomforting situations are key to fulfilling the learning goals of the course. The tensions that arise from these struggles cause students to learn. Some students even reflect on the Field Research Practical as something that changed their lives and in less extreme cases as a course in which they learned a lot about themselves. Supervisors play an important role in coaching them through this process, making use of basic ethnographic principles that have proven to be important teaching tools: building rapport, social interaction, and reflexivity are not only important tools for students to be able to comply with the learning goals of the course, they are also crucial for the supervisors in order to coach the students through this *rite de passage* that transforms them into fieldworkers.

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