Introduction to Special Issue II
Courage, Collaboration, and the Politics of Research on the Ground

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The narratives in this second issue—like those in the first—deliver powerful lessons, both individually and collectively. The first special issue about "Doing Research on the Ground" spoke primarily to tensions in the practitioner-researcher roles; this one speaks predominantly about courage, collaboration, and the politics of doing research in real world settings.

Although courage is not a word often associated with social science research, it appears to be a common theme in most of the narratives that follow. Of course courage comes in a variety of forms. Its most obvious incarnation may be when one is faced with physical risk. But courage can also take the form of confronting one's own fears, or staying committed to a path with unwavering devotion in spite of pressures to do otherwise. It can involve maintaining one's convictions about how research should be conducted when other approaches might be easier to follow, or sticking by one's findings when stakeholders don't like them or the political consequences that come with them. It can be about confronting the internal dynamics of a team, or tenaciously standing by a set of collaborators, or staying in a research relationship when things just aren't going very well, or leaving such a relationship despite the consequences of doing so. Or it can be about finding ways to negotiate one's environment just to stay true to oneself.

Although common threads link some of these narratives in exciting and unexpected ways, they also fall relatively comfortably into small family groupings, and are therefore presented in this volume in that way. In the first quartet, the issue of *facing dangers and confronting fears in the field* is most immediately evident. We pair the narratives into two subsets: dangerous environments and unfamiliar environments. In the opening piece Newman (along with his research team) studies HIV risk and prevention with men who have sex with men in Chennai, India. It is an environment hostile to both the men who participated in the study and the researchers conducting it. Newman wryly observes, "It should therefore come as no surprise" that conducting such research "is a contentious sociopolitical undertaking." Lidchi also confronts physical danger doing her research in Columbia, South America on internally displaced families. "Persisting with the research required thinking realistically of the risks involved in the project and overcoming fear," she writes. She considers the necessary and unnecessary risks that must be taken when working in unstable and violent areas of the world, and relays the thoughtful, personal lessons she learned on her research journey.

In the second pair of narratives in this first section researchers note that it often takes conscious acts of courage to venture into unknown territories. Farkus opens her narrative with her personal mantra, "I have to get comfortable with being uncomfortable." In her thoughtful account of conducting research with women in jail, her recognition that she must confront her own discomfort in this unfamiliar environment, despite the fact that she is physically safe and that the "jail's primary product" is "security," is powerful. Thompson and her colleagues provide a rich and multi-faceted narrative on the "quagmires

of conducting clinical research" that certainly goes well beyond just confronting the unknown. However, in one particularly engaging section of this narrative these researchers report on research that requires "entering communities that may be uncomfortable at best, and dangerous at worst." Thompson and her team wisely struggle with sorting out the difference between perceived dangers attributable to "internalized stereotypes" and situations that are "realistically unsafe," and offer some creative suggestions on how to respond to such situations.

The next family of narratives deal with the politics associated with producing and reporting research in a section we call *"Perfect" Science and "Relevant" Results (or the Politics of Producing and Reporting in Community-based Collaborations)*. This trio of papers opens with Weaver's narrative, in which he notes: "The cliché is that no one should be exposed to what goes into the production of sausages or legislation; the same can be said for the production of research articles." He then proceeds to expose us to just that, and in the process provides us with some particularly provocative ideas about the politics of reporting research results. Hostetter and Folaron, who were charged with the responsibility of doing "perfect research" by the state child welfare director, knew full well that "perfect research" was an impossible dream, and doing research under this expectation caused them to lead "research lives of quiet desperation." Nonetheless their research was enormously successful, as the state acted on their recommendations and made significant changes in policy and practice, in spite of the fact the results were the product of "less than perfect" research. Meezan and McBeath faced a very different, and almost contradictory, problem. Working as participatory evaluators, and fully embraced by the agencies with which they worked, they used the "perfect" design — a controlled field experiment — to answer research questions that all agreed were critically important to the way services were delivered. When the findings were not to their partners' liking, they found themselves shunned by those who had embraced both the study and the researchers; organizational learning and the development of best practice were jettisoned in the name of self-interest and organizational maintenance.

The final family of four narratives attends to *power, collaboration and "cold war"* (to borrow from O'Connor and Netting). The first pair of accounts in this last section deals primarily with power dynamics *within* research teams; the second pair deals with institutional and external influences on doing research on the ground. Of particular note in these final four narratives is the situational position of their authors and how it impacts the stories that are told. When O'Connor and Netting seek to make sense of their 20 years of experience conducting funded, collaborative research, they do so from their well-established place in the academy and from relatively equal positions. They thus have the distance and security to attempt to "normalize the experience in all its incredible peaks and valleys." The other voices in the collection of narratives are primarily those of untenured assistant professors and doctoral students, many of whom are working with collaborators who are more senior, and all of whom are in vulnerable positions within their institutions. These more vulnerable researchers do not yet have the distance to "normalize" their experiences, and thus offer their reports from the immediacy of their current situations. They also report on how they negotiated (sometimes successfully, sometimes not) the unequal power relationships in which they found themselves, and how these power relationships impacted their responses to the situations in which they found themselves.

In the first narrative of the final set, Staller, Buch and Birdsall use the narrative's construction to invite the reader to share the various perspectives of their team and to consider how these perspectives are influenced by issues of age, gender, status, university position, and power. Through this narrative, the reader gets a glimpse about how such issues impact both the internal dynamics of a collaborative research team doing community-based research and the way in which the members of the community relate to this diverse group. In the narrative by Jackson, Cameron and Staller, a doctoral student and an untenured junior faculty member who is the principle investigator of a research project struggle over almost everything about the research. So fierce are their disagreements about what occurred during the time that they worked together that an outsider friend had to be called in to moderate the telling of their story and respond to the editor's suggestions for revisions. Their troubled dynamics and the continuing tensions in their relationship are evident throughout the entire narrative starting with its two titles.

In the final pair of narratives in the volume, O'Connor and Netting reflect with great wisdom and insight on lessons learned about power dynamics from their rich collaborative experiences doing funded research over several decades. They warn us, "There are substantial power dynamics at play in team based research, dynamics one should never ignore or flee from. Recognizing and managing the power dynamics that accrue due to gender, discipline, university status, research design and methods will always be needed in team-based research." They further advise, "Team work can be difficult, tedious, and time consuming," but cheerfully admit "It can also be a whale of a good time." In the final narrative of the issue Crampton illustrates the point that doing research in real world settings, in a participatory and collaborative way, can be "tedious" and "time

consuming," but argues that this carries particular risks for the untenured assistant professor. His tenacious commitment to doing research that is more "relevant than elegant," and the way he has found to do such research as an untenured assistant professor in a competitive, research-intensive university environment, makes for a compelling and honest narrative.

While these three themes – facing dangers and fears, the politics of research, and issues of power and collaboration – were useful in grouping the narratives for the purpose of their presentation in this volume, there were other ideas woven in and between the entire collection of contributions that the reader will confront. We consider just three of them here: flexibility and creativity in the field; the politics of production and publication; and institutional pressures.

Flexibility and creativity in the field

Thompson and her team note, "This research is not for the faint of heart, the unmotivated or inflexible, as so much can happen within the unstructured boundaries within which this work is conducted." While community-based research endeavors can sometimes lead to "dead ends," as Weaver discovered, more often researchers demonstrate a fierce commitment to keeping their projects alive. The writers of these narratives share war stories about the unpredictable nature of doing research "on the ground". They demonstrate that community-based, real-world researchers must be determined, flexible and creative in order to carry out their mission. Jackson and Cameron changed their fundamental research question mid-stream with the sudden, unexpected announcement that the school in which they had planned to house their study was shutting down. Thompson's team resorted to "bright pink" colored recruitment sheets in an effort to bolster low study enrollments rates. Hostetter and Folaron,

"unaware of the pop-up nature of the case managers' email system," had to do damage control among angry case managers to continue their work. Most poignantly Newman reminds us that even more global events can impact this work when he writes "the *tsunami* brought home the realization that as much as I do my ethical best to protect our research staff, and myself, from foreseen trouble, there is much that is simply out of my control." In short, small and large crises, comic and tragic incidences, and bitter and sweet occurrences, are common in real-world research and necessitate the need for researchers who can respond flexibly and creatively in the moment.

Politics of production and publication

Another provocative theme, addressed with brutal honesty in a number of the narratives, has to do with the politics involved in producing publishable scientific knowledge. In an example from their experience, O'Connor and Netting report an attempt to explain that a project was in serious trouble to a program officer. The response was, "I know it will be hard, but I expect you [looking at us] to work with everyone here to figure out how to make this right. We're going to declare victory regardless of the results!" It was only then that they "realized that the program officer's reputation was on the line and that he had convinced a board of trustees to fund this multi-site, multi-million dollar project. It was not about us; it was not about the site; it was about the program officer's reputation. Our role was to figure out a way to redesign the project and cobble together in the interest of saving face, not doing good science."

Arguably even more troubling is the self-censorship observed by Weaver. "The strongest lesson for me was in the way we could not proceed even to publicly discuss our initial findings until we had conceptually re-framed these findings in a manner consistent with the values of the social work profession." Like cobbling together a research design based on saving face rather than good science described by O'Connor and Netting, Weaver reports, "Our re-framing was driven not by considerations of validity, but by the requirement for our research to fit with the prevailing intellectual and value paradigms of our profession." And the unwillingness to reframe or recast results, while it can lead to professional publications for the researchers, can also break bonds of friendship and years of trust, and close the door to future collaborations within the community. Meezan and McBeath note that when powerful people at the agencies with which they worked figured out that the study findings were being used to undo the experiment in funding from which they profited, and that the researchers were not going to change their results to meet the needs of the agencies, their agency partners shunned them. People stopped coming to meetings to hear about any further findings — "They just wanted us to go away."

If, as discussed above, flexibility and creativity are a hallmark of community-based research, honestly in reporting its disorderliness when it occurs can lead to additional problems. Crampton writes, "My impression was that article reviewers don't like things they don't recognize and many of them think community-based work is messy and foreign." Weaver echoes this sentiment, "Nonetheless, the finished product of the research process does obscure the messy reality of the process." The politics of publication take a different form in the collaborative work described by O'Connor and Netting in which researchers wanted to horde their empirical data for refereed journal articles which "counted" in their university settings, and were willing to write only data-free descriptive chapters for the agreed upon edited book.

Of course, the net result of the encroachment of politics into the doing and reporting of science is deeply significant because it impacts the "knowledge" that becomes available for consumption. Although writing of his own work, Weaver captures an idea that has much broader significance when he writes, "It is a sobering thought that the conclusions of social science research (perhaps even basic research) are always nested in the value paradigms of their professions, if not explicitly than through the kind of self-censoring in which we engage in this project."

Institutional pressures: Promotion and tenure

Finally a topic addressed directly in Crampton's work, but which is a recurring theme in a surprising number of the narratives in this collection, is an acknowledgment that most of the authors live their research lives situated in a university environment, which have their own institutional rules about membership (tenure). They are thus subject to consequences — either good and bad — depending on their institutions' responses. Doing research in the real world can be valued and the vicissitudes of this type of work can be understood; or it can be trivialized and its difficulties ignored.

Many writers in this volume address the lurking relationship between their research decisions and the tenure process. There are tales of successful and of failed tenure attempts. The untenured faculty represented in these narratives struggle with staying true to what they believe is good research while keeping a watchful eye on their "tenureablity". Others, securely tenured, look back at the decisions they made early in their research careers and note the relationship of those decisions to their tenure status. This raises important issues for the academy as an institution and about its impact on the shape and flavor of science. What are the incentives and disincentives built into the tenure process for doing research "on the ground"? What implications do these factors have for the kind of work that actually gets done? And how do these factors shape what we think we know – what we allow to be called "knowledge"?

Hostetter and Folaron write, "as we planned the methodology, we soon became aware of feeling pressured and torn in several directions. Our academic institution strongly emphasized the need for faculty to acquire grant income...Also, we both needed more publications for tenure and promotion." Weaver tells a tale of a career path that necessarily followed funding trails. Crampton, who sits on the other side of the tenure divide, reports advice from "one well meaning colleague" who suggested he stop attending time consuming community-based meetings but admitted that "the real barrier to isolating myself like that is I would feel lost. The reason I do this work is to change practice on the ground. Take away those long frustrating meetings in which we try to improve a big social service bureaucracy, and I would forget why I do what I do."

It is an important reminder. We must not forget *why* we do what we do. For some of us, *how* we do what we do keeps us honest and true to ourselves. But as these narratives illustrate, staying true to ourselves, in light of political and institutional pressures, often involves unrecognized acts of personal courage.