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## A field guide to International Studies

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## A field guide to International Studies

Becky Alexis-Martin (University of Bradford)

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**D**r Becky Alexis-Martin is a Peace Studies and International Development specialist based at the University of Bradford. She has undertaken fieldwork across the globe and agreed to share her experiences, including top tips for successful fieldwork, and some of the challenges you might face.

In 2016, I unwittingly embarked on what became a global journey to try to understand how we reconcile the global politics of humanitarian and environmental risk in the late Anthropocene. I have since undertaken fieldwork in the UK, Japan, Australia, Fiji, Kiribati, France, and the USA to ascertain the complex political and cultural geographies of a nuclear-armed world. My fieldwork has gifted me with some fascinating and memorable encounters. I strolled across fields in Colorado while chatting with [preppers](#) to learn about nuclear anxiety before Trump's bombastic rise to power. I visited the homes of the elderly [British nuclear test veterans](#) to hear their stories of lax health and safety during the Cold War. In Hiroshima, I interviewed the notorious Japanese [Union of Patriots](#), some of whom are atomic bomb denialists, and then heard the testimonies of the hibakusha on the same Peace Day. On a personal level, fieldwork has been a deeply humanising and enriching experience that has often provided me with the opportunity for

profound engagement with the communities that I research. However, it has also been a source of frustration, anxiety, and occasional despair.

My new research is supported by [UNA](#) and [ICAN](#), and delves into the nuclear-climate nexus and the production of atomic epistemic justice. My studies require me to return to Kiribati for fieldwork for the first time since the COVID pandemic – and on a personal note – for the first time since becoming an internal defibrillator

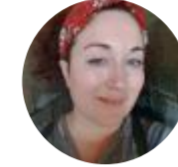
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slow. I am fortunate to have developed long-term relationships with the community that I research, and I am excited to return to the Pacific.

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Dr Becky Alexis-Martin

International Studies fieldwork is interdisciplinary and draws on methods across field-based disciplines, including Anthropology and Human Geography. Since the turn of the century, fieldwork-based approaches have flourished but there is still no definitive protocol for how to “do” fieldwork in International Studies. Arguably, this presents a disciplinary strength, as researchers are not constrained to particular methods and practices. It also generates space for new schools of thought to be forged and for novel methods to be trialled in the field. However, it also reveals a weakness – as the boundaries of the field, and of fieldwork, are poorly defined. International Studies fieldwork should not follow in the colonial footsteps of older disciplines – but must instead aim to decolonise and create better ways of thinking and working with communities that produce “win-win” outcomes for everyone. We are reliant on the communities that we engage with, and as researchers, we are always privileged and always vulnerable. Here are my top tips for successful International Studies fieldwork:

## 1. Embrace failure

“Prepare for the best but expect the worst” is a useful motto for anyone undertaking fieldwork. Embracing failure is not a negative philosophy, but instead offers a way to manage expectations and overcome adversity when things go wrong. Academia’s achievement culture means that we often don’t discuss our misadventures and disappointments in the field. This perpetuates and normalises the inaccurate notion that fieldwork should always go well, which leaves academics feeling inadequate. In reality, participants may stand us up, not answer our interview questions, and even verbally abuse us. Key events may be cancelled, or we may be refused access to vital locations at the last minute. Unforeseen circumstances may result in us getting sunstroke, marooned in the wrong place, bitten by mosquitos. Have a clear and accessible emergency plan in case something goes wrong. This plan should include systems that will improve your likelihood of getting help and offer routes to communicate with your department and those close to you in the unlikely event that you cannot do this.

Risk assessments can help us to identify any potential issues, but sometimes things will go wrong regardless of our preparedness and field expertise. Being immersed in the field can make minor obstacles and obstructions in the field can feel like personal failings - but they are not. Give yourself time and space to process. Use failure as an opportunity for creativity and resilience. Don’t be afraid to share, discuss, and normalise your experiences with your peers – you are not alone.

## 2. Be dynamic

Two important priorities during fieldwork are the wellbeing of your community and the quality of your data. Taking a dynamic and iterative approach will help you to generate positive outcomes. Ensure that flexibility is baked into your plans and include space for your ideas to develop as fieldwork progresses. Each interview, questionnaire, or ethnography will yield new thoughts that will shape your work. Do not be afraid to adapt your approach if you find that particular practices or questions are working well – or are not giving you the insights that you hoped for!

Through repetition and gentle development of your field methods you will discover the best way to connect with your community.

There are many ways to make fieldwork iterative. For example, you may want to undertake a pilot study to ensure that you are asking the right questions in the right way, before embarking upon more extensive fieldwork. You may want to use your first days in the field to immerse yourself, acculturate, and learn about your community without the pressure to collect data. I personally find this approach very helpful, as it offers a way to develop presence and ties with the community and to gain their trust without pressure. Chatting over a cup of coffee is work. Watching the world go by is work. Sitting in a bar while a football match is on is work. Observing a politicised local protest is work, even if you just take reflective notes. Slow observation allows you to prepare for and understand the dynamic socio-cultural landscape of your study. Your visibility can become part of an iterative process of seeking and retaining community engagement.

### 3. Listen to your body

Fieldwork isn't an extreme sport and should be accessible to everyone. Disabled bodies are normal bodies. However disciplinary depictions of and expectations around fieldwork are historically sexist, racist, and ableist and present outdated understandings of what a fieldwork-active academic looks like. Personally, I adapt my fieldwork practices to suit my needs as a disabled academic. I push back against productivity culture to manage my energy. I consult my medical team before travelling – and if they think I can do fieldwork – I won't let anyone tell me that I can't. I put systems into place to stay healthy: this includes carrying medical warning cards, appropriate food, and medication wherever I go. When I'm on fieldwork I eat many more breakfast biscuits than I would really like - but I stay well!

My greatest challenge has not been my research environment, despite working in places with limited sanitation, electricity, and medical aid. It has been other people's prejudices. Nothing is insurmountable with the right adaptations in place. I have shared some of my adaptations, but adaptations will look different from person to person based on their individual needs.

It is paramount to prioritise your mental health and physical wellbeing. Pay attention to how you feel during fieldwork. The research process can produce many different emotions, from happiness to frustration and doubt. Ethnographic methods are immersive and can be very intense. We are human and our research topics can be emotive. Respect your mental health and accept the support of mentors, supervisors, and friends to manage any feelings of isolation or sadness. Remind yourself your priorities and life beyond fieldwork, your interests, hobbies, and important relationships. Keep a field diary of your emotions so that you can explore your feelings later in the context of your research, and act should you need to gain mental health support. I would personally recommend counselling after fieldwork to anyone who undertakes research on an emotive topic, as it will help you to decompress. You can make the most of free university counselling services for this.

While fieldwork humanises and breathes life into research, your personal wellbeing is more important than any discovery that you will make in the field.

### Further Reading

Cunliffe, A.L. and Alcadipani, R., 2016. The politics of access in fieldwork: Immersion, backstage dramas, and deception. *Organizational Research Methods*, 19(4), pp.535-561.

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### Author

Becky Alexis-Martin is a Peace Studies and International Development specialist based at the University of Bradford. She was the inaugural winner of the BISA L.H.M. Ling Outstanding First Book Prize in 2020 for her book *Disarming Doomsday*. You can follow Becky on Twitter @MysteriousDrBex.