TRADITIONAL VERSUS CONTEMPORARY FIELD WORK IN AMERICAN URBAN GEOGRAPHY

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The principal training of the geographer should come, wherever possible, by doing fieldwork.

—Carl O. Sauer, 1956

Following up on the long legacy of geography as exploration (Livingstone, 1992), field work in the first half of the 20th century in American geography was almost a methodological creed, indeed a punctilious doctrine. Field courses were a required part of a graduate degree in geography. The field work hangover continued into the second half of the 20th century. Gold et al. (1991, p. 21) asserted, “Geographers have long regarded fieldwork as being central to their teaching and research and as something intrinsic to the very nature of being a geographer.” Lewis (1968, p. 53) noted that “a good field trip can be a superb experience for all concerned—achieving a rarely-reached pinnacle of intellectual excellence.” Further, “There is nothing immoral about taking students to see strange and wonderful places, and no teacher needs feel guilty about enjoying the Golden Gate Bridge or cobras at the zoo” (Lewis, 1968, p. 55). Foskett (1997, p. 189) declared that “for most geographers fieldwork is a key component of their enthusiasm for the subject and one of the strongest elements of their own personal biography.” Perhaps the culmination of traditional field approaches in geography was Platt’s (1959) Field Study in American Geography, a collection of 32 essays and analyses by a variety of authors on field experiences and philosophies.

Following the era honoring the grand tenets of field work was a gradual move to demean field activity.

Field work in geography is neither magical, mystical, nor sacrosanct, although some practitioners appear to have tried to make it seem so; all geographical research need not be based on field work to be of good quality.... The rubric, “field work,” has become canonized, and apparently it has created qualms of conscience among some geographers. A belief in the need for field work has been such a central ingredient in the value systems of many professional geographers that a surpris-
ing amount of effort has been devoted to attempts to stretch the definition of "field work" to cover a ludicrous range and variety of activities. (Corey et al., 1968, p. i)

Hart (1968, p. 37) summarized the problem with field instruction in graduate geography programs:

The role of field work in geographic instruction has been largely discredited over the past generation, partly because field instruction has been so dreadfully dull, unimaginative, and mechanical. "Field techniques" courses and summer field camps were allowed to become bogged down in trivia. Student time was squandered on learning archaic techniques completely unrelated to contemporary geographic research, and the students were taught how to collect data, without being told why the data were worth collecting.

Gould (1999, p. 90) was especially critical in derogating his graduate experience in summer field camp:

[Field camp was] the apex of methodological training, in which we spent over a thousand student hours compiling a land-use map with fractional coding. Unfortunately, nobody knew what to do with it when it was finished. And then more hundreds of hours mapping the land use of a small Wisconsin town for the purpose of delimiting that most profound of geographic concepts, the CBD—something that any inhabitant over five years old could have done with his eyes shut. It put me off urban geography for twenty years.

Those who continued to cling to the field work core of geography were typically geographers who disparaged quantitative approaches and loathed large computer data sets. They were part of the geographic tradition that Gould (1999, p. 86) referred to as reflecting "the bumbling amateurism and antiquarianism that had spent half a century of opportunity in the university piling up a slagheap of unstructured factual accounts." On the other hand, many quantitative studies of central place theory were dependent on original data collection in the field (e.g., Berry and Garrison, 1958a, 1958b).

Present-day field experiences in urban geography represent a completely different perspective on field research compared to traditional methods. Community-based awareness of contemporary urban geographers leads to an interest in local field analysis. As part of the current trend to establish discourse on urban issues, field analyses are undertaken on an as-needed basis, rather than following the mechanical, impersonal approach of the pre-1960s. Just as the goal of much contemporary urban research is to produce a discourse or "conversation," so too does field-based inquiry seek to gain enlightened insights on particular issues of interest, not always to procure comprehensive survey perspectives.

In contrast to the detailed field mapping of the past, mapping in the field today is a rarity (Table 1). Qualitative data, impressions of neighborhoods, and participant observation characterize today's field experiences, in contrast to the traditional "objective" gathering of quantitative data. In the past, one had to justify carefully the boundaries of the study area (a uniform or functional region), whereas today there is little concern with the exact bounds of, say, a neighborhood, and there is little or no need to rationalize the area being studied—simply select an area for a case study. Elaborate sampling strategies were
Table 1.—Comparisons of Traditional and Contemporary Field Work in Urban Geography

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional characteristics</th>
<th>Contemporary characteristics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Careful justification of selection of study area boundaries</td>
<td>No justification of area selected; fluid, undefined boundaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehensive data gathering</td>
<td>Case studies, participant observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field classes required</td>
<td>No field classes required</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field mapping of land uses</td>
<td>No field mapping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generation of hypotheses in field</td>
<td>No hypotheses used</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantitative data collection, objectivity</td>
<td>Qualitative data collection, impressions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representative random sampling methods</td>
<td>Nonrepresentative selection, no sampling attempted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systematic survey research</td>
<td>Systematic survey research</td>
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employed in the past (Berry and Baker, 1968), whereas today there is little concern with representative selection. Instead of field work being "the principal training of... a geographer" (Sauer, 1956, p. 296), now no field courses are required of graduate students. No hypotheses need be generated via field observation because hypotheses are seldom used. Systematic survey research (door-to-door, telephone, and postal questionnaire surveys) is about the only feature that characterizes both traditional and contemporary methods of obtaining original data.

A few recent examples of articles in Urban Geography illustrate these points. Vanderbeck and Johnson (2000, p. 6) used "qualitative evidence collected through interviews and observation/participant observation" to study "the role of the shopping mall in the lives of young people" (p. 5). Walcott (1999) interviewed 47 leading participants responsible for the resurgence of downtown Indianapolis from the early 1970s to the late 1990s. Zhou (1998, pp. 534–535), in addition to using published data, conducted "interviews with business organizations... during three summers of field work in New York and Los Angeles... [and] similar sets of Chinese business associations in both metropolitan areas." Boswell et al. (1988) and Mattingly (1999) carried out 432 and 500 telephone interviews, respectively, to obtain data on attitudes of Blacks toward housing discrimination in Miami and local labor-market dynamics for immigrant Mexican households in San Diego. Dowling (1998) used semistructured interviews in two suburban Vancouver neighborhoods, with one third of the interviews selected by referrals by other residents interviewed. Dowling (1998, p. 109) stated: "I make no claims about the representativeness of either the interviews or the neighborhoods." Olds (1998) used direct quotes from many informal and formal open-ended interviews in a case study of the trans-Pacific property development process in Vancouver, recognizing that "this case study is hardly representative" (p. 364). Bondi (1998) relied on 42 semistructured, "nonrepresentative" interviews in three "urban landscapes" of Edinburgh conducted by a research assistant: "I use empirical evidence from interviews and other sources in an attempt to convince readers of the
value and validity of one particular interpretation” (p. 181). Paradis (2000) devoted one paragraph to the results of a survey of 180 residents in the small town of Galena, Illinois, without explaining how these 180 residents were selected. Yet throughout his article Paradis displayed personal familiarity with the community that reflected close field knowledge, though no reference to field investigation is mentioned in the article.

Field analysis has been transformed as geography has evolved from Pattison’s (1964) area studies tradition in the late 1950s into the quantitative era (especially in the 1960s) and into the contemporary period. Hart (1979, p. 111), writing about American geography in the 1950s, opined, “Our emphasis on field work influenced the kind of students we recruited. Most of our undergraduate majors were boys from the farms and small towns, and a disproportionate share of our graduate students and faculty members were from the Middle West.” By contrast, it is wonderfully refreshing today to see the advances urban geography is making, step-by-step, toward gender proportioning, the nationwide and international recruiting of graduate students, the nationwide dispersal of quality departmental development, and the demand-supported basis for contemporary, flexible field knowledge and analysis.

LITERATURE CITED


Platt, R. S., 1959, Field Study in American Geography. Research Paper No. 61, Department of Geography. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago.