

## Caring for your health during fieldwork

Fforum ~ February 22, 2012

Christine Beier

Cabeceras Aid Project

**1. Introduction.** My name is Chris Beier, and I am, among other things, a practicing documentary linguist. I was trained in the linguistic anthropology program at UT-Austin, and have been doing humanitarian work and endangered language documentation in lowland Peruvian Amazonia since 1995. Atypically, I began doing serious fieldwork projects in indigenous communities in Amazonia several years *before* beginning graduate school. Much of my humanitarian fieldwork since 1995 has been focused on improving health conditions in indigenous communities, and I have also co-designed and co-coordinated several successful team-based language documentation projects over the years. The following material is based on my experiences in these different circumstances.

Linguistic fieldwork can take us to places very unlike those in which we usually live and work – to places in which our usual assumptions, habits, and expectations do not apply; and to places in which the social and material resources available to us may be very different, or very limited, compared to our familiar home environment. Therefore, a crucial part of preparing ourselves for a successful fieldwork project is (a) first, to assess the ways that our project may impact our health and safety, and (b) second, to take appropriate steps in *advance* that will enable us to maximize our health and safety once we undertake our fieldwork project.

**2. Goals for the talk.** The goals of this talk are: (1) to outline the key areas of consideration regarding our health and safety during fieldwork – including our physical, mental, and social health; and (2) to provide a set of strategies for preventing and solving problems that can arise during fieldwork in any of these health areas. This talk is based primarily on my fieldwork experiences over the last 17 years in Amazonia – in both solo and team-based projects – but the core content is generalizable to a variety of fieldwork situations, potentially undertaken anywhere in the world.

There are not many resources available in print to help you plan for the personal or logistical aspects of your fieldwork project. As a result, most of our preparations in these areas must be based solely on information we obtain by word of mouth, and too often we can find ourselves unprepared for situations that come up during our fieldwork project, essentially because we didn't talk to the right person at the right time. My hope for today is to touch on some of the core aspects of preparing ourselves personally for fieldwork, ones that lie outside the kinds of preparations that are foregrounded in your academic training, such that you are more broadly prepared for undertaking – and for enjoying – your fieldwork project.

**3. Definitions.** For the purposes of this talk, I will define linguistic fieldwork as 'an extended stay by a researcher in a strategically chosen place, the purpose of which stay is to gather data, knowledge, and insight regarding a language spoken in that place.'

This definition rests on the assumption that the 'strategically chosen place' is not a place the researcher already calls home, but rather is a place in which the researcher is an 'outsider' in some significant sense. As a result, many of our naturalized, sub-attentional strategies that we rely on in our everyday lives here at home may not apply. Moreover, I have observed over the years that if we don't learn to recognize the kinds of things that we take for granted about our surroundings, we may end up putting ourselves, and others, at risk of harm.

In addition, a defining characteristic of fieldwork is a high expectation for productivity in a tightly constrained timeframe. This is one of the strongest arguments for being well-prepared for taking care of our health and safety – the temporal and financial stakes are usually very high during a fieldwork project, and any health or safety crisis has the potential to unmake our entire project.

All in all, the novelty and strangeness of our circumstances during a new fieldwork project, combined with the high stakes involved, can lead to quite a bit of additional moment-to-moment, day-to-day, stress. Fortunately, there are ways you can prepare yourself to handle this additional stress, and strategies that can help you prevent most types of stressors from getting the best of you.

#### **4. Core principles.**

So let me state explicitly my core approach to handling personal health and safety issues:

- (1) knowledge is powerful
- (2) knowledge is comforting
- (3) knowledge includes understanding the limits of your knowledge, such that you are able to continually take in new information as your experiences unfold.

I suggest that this approach is one of the best means for handling yourself and your circumstances skillfully throughout your fieldwork project.

• During the remainder of this talk, I will address the following topic areas in the following order:

1. Safety
2. Physical health
3. Mental health
4. Social health

**5. Safety.** So let me say a few words about safety. In talking about ‘safety’ here, I am talking about preparing ourselves for harms that may befall us in the course of our activities as we move about in the world. Safety, as any other area, requires striking a balance; too much concern with safety may become paranoia, too little concern may become recklessness. The more we are able to recognize ‘cause and effect’, or ‘action and reaction’ in our environment, however, the better our balance will be.

**5.1. Safety in transit.** Since, fieldwork as I’ve defined it requires a trip to somewhere, let’s talk first for a few minutes about safety in transit. I’d like to begin with...

**5.1.1. The story of B.** B is a good friend of mine, generally a sensible and competent person. A few years ago, B went on a trip to Chile. At one point, in order to get to a relatively remote part of Chile, B made his way to the bus station in a busy Chilean city. Knowing that as a white guy traveling alone, he was a likely target for thieves, he had packed his valuables carefully into a small shoulderbag which he wore across his chest. As he was walking to the bus terminal, as he tells it, someone approached him from behind and threw a revolting-smelling liquid on him, splashing his back and his shoulderbag. Wary of being set up for a robbery, he flinched and kept walking on for several blocks before he stopped to inspect the damage. At that point, he glanced around for shifty characters; and seeing none, he set down his hand luggage and pulled out a handkerchief to clean himself off. He took the small bag off his shoulder, looped the strap around his leg, wiped it off, and then turned his attention to cleaning off the back of his clothing. Seconds later, he realized the shoulderbag was now gone, and with it all of his carefully packed valuables – his passport, cash, bus ticket, credit cards, camera, and the list goes on.

Being a sensible guy, B had also put some money in another bag, and had emailed himself a photocopy of his passport. None the less, he lost a lot of time replacing the passport, had to cancel an entire leg of his itinerary, and took a significant financial loss.

**5.1.2. Lessons learned from the story of B.** Why have I told you this little story of my friend B? To make the following crucial points:

- Carry as little of value as possible, honing your valuables down to a minimum. The less you have, the less you have to lose.
- When in transit, carry your passport, most of your money, your credit and/or debit cards, and a backup of your data in a waist wallet or some other similar doodad worn inside your clothing. Don’t take it off or

even reveal that it is there, except when absolutely necessary. Professional thieves are just that: skilled professionals!

- When in transit, carry money in more than one place, and carry a backup debit card with your copy of your passport. Theft does happen, and you don't want to end up completely without resources.
- When in transit, put some spending money in your pocket or shoulderbag, for two reasons: first, for your convenience as you move about; and second, as a decoy for pickpockets or muggers.
- Always carry a copy of your passport (and/or other identification) in a separate place from the original documents; leave another copy with someone you trust; and email a scan to yourself. This will save you much time and difficulty if you should need to replace any of these key documents.
- The last point is a generalization, and perhaps the most important lesson that B's story taught me: B met his misfortune precisely in the moment that his *attention* shifted. Obviously, bad things happen sometimes, no matter what we do; our luck runs out eventually; and we can be outwitted, as B was. But the more alert we are, and the more attention we pay to our surroundings, the greater the odds of avoiding mishaps such as B's.

**5.2. Safety in your field setting.** Building on the lessons we've learned from B, here are just a few more suggestions, based on a range of experiences – my own and others – over the years, to increase your personal safety during your field project, whether you are on the move or settled in to your fieldsite.

- Don't bring stuff that you aren't completely sure that you will need. More stuff to keep track of results in more cognitive load and more stress, including increased vulnerability to theft and loss. The fewer things you bring with you, the less you have to keep track of, and the less vulnerable you will look and feel.
- As a general principle, things you can't bear to lose should never leave your sight – most particularly, your field equipment and your data. In transit, if you have to choose between keeping an eye on your suitcase full of clothing or your equipment case, train yourself to tune in to the latter! In your fieldwork setting, if you can't bear to lose it, keep it with you.
- Remember, I said, as a general principle. In reality, this is not always a practicable strategy. But bearing the principle in mind will keep you alert to the risks you are taking.
- Be observant and learn from other people's doings! Watch what local people do, and observe the outcomes of their behavior! Among other things, obliviousness and naiveté on the part of visitors stand out glaringly in the eyes of locals, and sets up the visitors for all sorts of negative social repercussions (ranging from not being taken seriously, to being taken advantage of, to being robbed, etc.)
- Let me mention an excellent example, one of my personal pet peaves: Americans carrying around fancy cameras in a conspicuous manner! This is one of the surest ways to look like an outsider and to make yourself a target for a host of potentially bad things.
- In general, then, in order to reduce the risks to you from unscrupulous people: be alert and *look* alert; be modest in dress and behavior; and don't assume that you necessarily know everything that is going on around you. I don't mean that you should feel paranoid, but I do mean that the more unfamiliar your surroundings are, the more likely you are to be noticed and targeted as an outsider. So be aware, be cautious, and know how to minimize your losses.

Shifting now toward the area of overlap between personal safety and personal health: During your fieldwork project you simply must be extra cautious and recognize that you can't take the same risks during fieldwork that you might take at home. Stay sensitive to the novelty of your situation and don't become complacent. Avoid falling, burning yourself, cutting yourself, going to unknown places alone, and so on. more conscientiously than you would at home. The stakes are different, so your judgment calls must be different.

**6. Physical health.** In my experience, the most important strategy in caring for your physical health is educating yourself. By this I mean educating yourself about yourself as an organism; and educating yourself about your environment.

Assuming greater responsibility for your own healthcare has three concrete benefits: it will increase your usable knowledge, increase your confidence, and increase your competence. Each of these things is increasingly important, the further you get from your home environment and from your own doctor.

Over the years, Lev and I have traveled and worked in some very difficult conditions and for some very extended periods of time; as a result, up to this point, between us, we have lived through many different strains amoebic dysentery, giardia, cholera, dengue, hepatitis A, and numerous bouts of malaria, both vivax and falciparum.

Over the course of our team-based projects, we have cared for teammates with respiratory, gastrointestinal, topical and fungal infections, and some fairly severe hangovers. But none of our teammates has ever gotten severely ill, and no one had to go home and forfeit a fieldtrip on our watch thus far.

• These facts are instructive of two things:

(1) sickness, to some degree, will happen when you are in a new microbial environment; and

(2) the degree of sickness can be handled skillfully and kept to a minimum, if you are careful, sensible, level-headed, and prepared for caring for your health.

• The life-threatening risks are: Accident, dehydration, drowning: a broken bone, hemorrhage, or punctured lung can be fatal if not properly treated.

• Add to those the project-threatening risks: Accident, disease, food and/or water poisoning: even a fairly minor accident could force you to go home and forfeit your project.

• The productivity-threatening risks are: Illness, demoralization, and excessive alcohol consumption.

• I'll return to and elaborate upon several of these risks at later points, as appropriate.

## **6.1. Precautions.**

**6.1.1. Preparations before traveling.** There are some basic steps that you should take before you travel:

• Visit the International Travel Clinic on campus, or a similar facility available through your personal healthcare provider. Do this 8 weeks prior to your departure, so that you have time for vaccinations and other time-consuming preparatory steps.

• Visit website of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ([www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)). Visit their 'Travel Health' section, and read up on the details of the social and environmental conditions and potential health problems in the place you'll be working. Compile notes on the most common diseases in the region, their vectors, and their treatments. Take this information with you, in case you do not have access to competent medical personnel, or the internet, when you need it!

• Read, or even bring with you, a copy of *Where there is no doctor*, by David Werner, from Hesperian Health Guides. This book can be purchased online or downloaded for free from Hesperian Health Guides.

• Carry copies of your health records, your glasses prescription, and other prescriptions with you.

• If you take prescription medications (including birth control), carry enough with you to last the whole stay. Don't assume these medicines will be readily available where you are going.

• If you really need your glasses, carry a spare pair with you. If you'll be traveling or working in rustic settings, wear a 'croakie' to keep your glasses on your head.

• Carry a basic medical kit with you – see the spreadsheet for suggestions.

• Above all, always travel with a course of antibiotics (or two, depending on the length of your stay). An untreated infection – whether internal or topical – can result in lost weeks of productivity, or even a curtailed trip.

• And always travel with a plan for how to obtain clean drinking water (this means knowing whether you can buy it, boil it, bleach it, etc.)

• Note that you may need to schedule extra time to equip your medical kit upon arrival in your host country, before you travel to your final research destination.

• Keep your medical kit in a safe place out of sight, in order to avoid the awkward situation of having people ask you to (1) play doctor for them and/or (2) give them your medical supplies!

**6.1.2. Upon arrival in your fieldwork setting.** Take the following steps shortly after you arrive in your chosen research site:

• **Get to know your local resources and options:**

- Within a day or two of your arrival, familiarize yourself with the local healthcare resources in your environment:
- Identify the nearest hospital, clinic, or healthpost.
- If possible, introduce yourself to the person or people most likely to help you if you have a health problem; assess to the best of your ability how knowledgeable they are and how helpful they will be if you need them – be realistic about this.
- Realize that the farther you are from competent medical care, the more careful you should be in assessing the risks of your behaviors.

• **Respond and adapt appropriately to local environmental conditions:**

- **Dress** properly to protect yourself from environmental inconveniences. In general, greater coverage is better than less coverage, for various reasons.
- **Sunburn and sunstroke:** Protect yourself from the sun if you are working nearer to the equator than your normally live. Sunscreen is not a realistic everyday option.
- **Insects:** Protect yourself from insect bites from the first day on. Topical infections easily result from open sores on the skin, and scratching insect bites is the easiest way to end up with open sores. This is the single biggest problem our teams have faced over the years of fieldwork! Educate yourself regarding the insect-vector-borne illnesses in your area, and learn how to minimize risk of infection.
- **Fungus:** If you're working in tropical conditions, be sure to keep your skin, especially on your feet, as dry and clean as possible. Fungal infections can be very difficult to cure.
- Strategize reasonable options for including some healthy physical activity once or twice a week: walking, hiking, swimming, yoga, jumping rope, playing frisbee.
- **Food and water:** What you eat and drink are perhaps the single greatest threat to your state of health on a day to day basis.
- To the degree possible, preparing your own food will reduce your exposure to germs.
- Be sure to have clean drinking water available at all times. For us, boiling and bleaching are the easiest strategies and most economical options at our fieldsites.
- At the same time, sharing food and drink with people is one of the fundamental bonding experiences for human beings.
- Be cautious without being paranoid.

**6.1.3. Dealing with being sick.** Given the high value placed on 'productivity' in fieldwork, one of the most common challenges that I've seen fieldworkers face is actually recognizing and addressing health issues. But I've also seen that avoiding dealing with a health issue on the short term usually backfires on the long term.

• **Here are the most common problems to watch for:**

- Avoid serious infections! If you cut yourself, get a blister, burn yourself, etc., disinfect the wound and keep it dry. If you don't do this, you're likely to end up needing a course of antibiotics.
- Get enough rest! Your immune system is already under stress and depriving your body of sleep will further compromise your health.
- Pay attention to changes in how you feel, and if something doesn't seem right, look up the symptoms in WTIND. This will help you (1) diagnose your condition and (2) prevent you from going off the deep end with worry or paranoia about what dread disease you might have.
- If you have symptoms of something for more than a day or two, talk to someone about it – anyone who you know to be at least as knowledgeable, or more knowledgeable than yourself.
- Take other people's healthcare advice graciously, but only take well-considered and well-reasoned courses of action, since many people's recommendations can actually make you more sick.

- If you need medicine, take it. Sicknesses that you would recover from simply with bedrest at home can be much harder to fight off under the conditions of fieldwork, so recalibrate your judgments about when medicines are necessary.
- Recognize the tendency to misrecognize mental or emotional discomfort as physical illness. If you need a ‘sick day’ for any reason, take it! But don’t misdiagnose and then mis-treat yourself in this area.

**7. Mental health.** Caring for the health and well-being of your body is the most obvious topic for a talk on healthcare in the field, but a successful fieldwork project requires more than just physical health – both your research productivity and your sense of satisfaction will be increased if you are attentive to your mental and social health as well.

In my view, the most important strategy in caring for your mental health is knowing yourself, and especially knowing and respecting your individual strengths and weaknesses. Different people cope with stress in very different ways, and fieldwork can be very stressful. If you are aware of how you react to and handle stress, then you will be better able to deal with the idiosyncrasies of the people you are living and working with in the field.

As I see them, these are the principal challenges fieldworkers face, particularly early on in their fieldwork careers: disorientation and confusion, due to the novelty of their physical and social environment; self-doubt; panic and/or anxiety; loneliness; and lack of camaradery – not only social, but also intellectual (for solo ventures).

While it’s likely that every human being experiences these states at some time or other, fieldwork can increase them, especially if you’re in a completely new environment, doing completely new kinds of work; and/or if you’re not working alongside people you already know well.

**7.1. Proactive steps we can take.** So, if these are states we’re likely to experience during fieldwork, what can we do about it?

- On the one hand, we can accept that these things are normal, and therefore not fear them or worry about them too much; they will come and then they will go.
- On the other hand, knowing that these states are likely, we can take steps to alleviate them when they turn up in our experience.
- As I said, I think the key strategy in caring for your mental health is knowing yourself, and especially knowing and respecting your individual strengths and weaknesses. So as part of your preparation for your fieldwork project, observe your reactions to stress and difficulties in your home environment, and learn what your most common strategies for handling stress and difficulties are: working harder? escapism? exercise? eating? What do you already do that actually reduces stress and improves your state of mind? Once you know this, you can equip yourself for having similar options in the field. Fieldwork is not the time to try to change or improve your habits for dealing with stress! At the same time, you want to encourage those habits of yours that will improve your fieldwork experience, not erode it over time – like, for example, drinking to excess to block out stress, or isolating yourself socially to avoid stress.

In my experience, one of the most important environmental factors you’ll need to address is the issue of privacy. Your fieldwork project is likely to put you in unfamiliar circumstances with unfamiliar people. Moreover, even if you collaborate with people you know from other contexts, living and working together in a fieldwork setting will be different than your prior interactions. And for most of us in this room, I’ll bet that we’re used to being able to separate ourselves from other people when they get on our nerves. Academic types, in my experience, require quite a bit of privacy to function well...

**7.2. Privacy.** What do I mean by privacy? I mean ‘the quality or state of being apart from company or observation.’ Privacy is something that many people value and need, and they often take for granted as part of their social world. But in fact, the notion of privacy is uncommon in many cultures, and even considered dangerous or aberrant in some places.

The people you are living and/or working with may feel a responsibility not to leave you alone, according to their own social values and norms. So, if privacy is something you value or need, figure out how and when to get it – tactfully, yet frequently enough – so that you can deal skillfully with other people when it is necessary!

In Nanti society, for example, no Nanti wanted to be in the village alone – it was like a form of social death – and so out of care for us, Nanti people wouldn't knowingly leave Lev or me alone in the village, unless they thought we were asleep! So I learned how to discreetly fake taking a nap, when I needed to read, write, or just think in solitude.

Privacy actually breaks down into two components: being physically alone, and feeling unobserved. Knowing this, you can take steps to achieve one, the other, or both components. For example, in the early years of living together sharing a two-person tent, Lev and I learned how to be alone together, which is to say, experience the benefits of personal privacy even when sitting right next to one another.

Some easy suggestions for gaining some privacy include: going for a walk or swim by yourself (if this is a safe option); doing a solitary task like dishes or laundry in silence; retiring to your room or tent to rest or 'nap' for 10 or 15 minutes in the middle of the day; going to bed early so that you can rest, awake, before falling asleep.

**7.3. Loneliness.** On the other end of the spectrum from the need for privacy is the need to cope with loneliness during a fieldwork project, especially if there is no one around who you know really well.

• **Healthy antidotes to loneliness include:**

- keeping a journal, in which you can articulate your experiences, vent your frustrations, work through problems, and strategize for the future; a journal can help you keep track of your own point of view on your circumstances, which can in turn help you be more flexible in dealing with the points of views of others.
- getting some exercise – take a walk, go for a swim, dance to your iPod... simple physical activity can clear your head, break the spell of a bad mood, dissipate frustration from a difficult session of work, and generally help reset your system.
- bringing something like an iPod and listening to familiar music.
- bring a novel or something that isn't work to read and set aside 15 to 30 minutes to read it.
- visiting people for an hour at the end of the day, creating and cementing new friendships. Recognize that you may need to seek out social connections and take some social risks in order to keep yourself healthy on the longer term.

• **Unhealthy antidotes to loneliness include:**

- Putting yourself in compromising social circumstances that undermine your ability to work – for example, going out at night, or socializing with people instead of working enough.
- Drinking too much – either alone or socially.
- Isolating yourself from the people around you because you feel awkward, uncomfortable, lonely, etc. This may feel better on the short-term, but will backfire on the long-term!
- Likewise, working too much in order to avoid feeling lonely – pacing yourself during a fieldwork project is crucial to your total productivity. For example, Lev and I have very different social and interactional needs, and to each maintain our sanity, we actually pace ourselves very differently during a fieldwork project. Get to know and understand your own balance of work to non-work time as your fieldwork project unfolds.

**8. Social health.** What do I mean by social health? I mean the process of managing your relationships with other people during your fieldwork project to maximize your individual well-being and productivity while also behaving in ways that are respectful and appropriate in the eyes of others. Put another way, it is very important for you to 'act human' according to local definitions at least some of the time.

In my view, linguistic description and documentation are indeed 'social sciences' in as much that the enterprise of building relationships with people is crucial to gathering good and reliable data; and is

crucial to creating a shared investment between the researcher and local participants. The key strategy for your social health is to learn to strike a balance between often opposing forces.

- It is important to be respectful but not to be dishonest with local participants about the nature of your commitment to them, their community, their language, etc. If you think you'll be back, say so. If you think this is a one-time visit, don't promise you'll return. It is better to remain vague about the future than to make promises that you may not be able to keep.
- Accept your otherness – where you come from, what you care about, what you do all day... being a researcher is a weird livelihood in most people's eyes. If you're honest about this, with yourself and with others, it will mean that the connections you forge with people will be more genuine and satisfying to everyone involved.
- Strike a balance between what you want to spend your time doing and what others want you to spend your time doing. Only responding to your own desires, or only responding to others' desires for you, will inevitably lead to tension and discord, so pay attention to striking a balance – if not on a daily basis, then at least on a weekly basis.

**8.1. Food gifts.** Gifts of food and drink can be one of the trickiest aspects of social life for the field researcher. On the one hand, refusing a food gift can damage a budding relationship permanently. On the other hand, people may give you food (and/or drink) that you do not want to consume. If at all possible, accept the gift, and deal with its consumption (or not) as a separate issue. Even consuming a little bit of a gift (without grimacing) can do the necessary symbolic work to reinforce a friendship.

**8.2. Local social activities.** If people invite you to participate in local social activities, do your best to participate sometimes, to some degree, as a sign of your respect for them. Even if participating in local social activities feels awkward or isn't 'fun' for you, doing so to the best of your abilities can be a very important sign of respect and trustworthiness to your local friends and collaborators. If you don't invest in what your collaborators consider important, it will be very difficult to get them to invest in what you consider important (that is, your linguistic research!)

## **6. Concluding remarks.**

- You can find resources, including useful weblinks and downloadable checklists, at [www.cabeceras.org/selfsufficientfieldworker.htm](http://www.cabeceras.org/selfsufficientfieldworker.htm)
- I am happy to consult with you one on one about anything that has come up today during this talk, or any other issue related to your fieldwork project, if you think I might be of service to you. My email address is cmbeier at gmail dot com.