



## Investing in the field: Positionalities in money and gift exchange in Vietnam

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 15 November 2011  
Received in revised form 4 March 2012  
Available online 18 April 2012

#### Keywords:

Investment  
Fieldwork  
Positionalities  
Money  
Gifts  
Research design  
Vietnam

### ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to the existing literature on positionality, ethics, research design, and the politics of the field by sketching power relations between an American researcher and Vietnamese respondents in Vietnam. I illustrate how two types of investments, financial compensation and gift exchange, “live” in the field as arbitrators of power relations between researcher and respondent. Specifically, I argue that financial and symbolic investments are important yet neglected aspects of the fieldwork experience for both investigators and research subjects because they allow both parties to deploy and negotiate multiple positionalities in the field. In sum, the paper makes three points: it outlines the multiple positionalities at play as scholars plan and execute their research; it introduces the concept of investment to field methods, with a focus on financial compensation and gift giving; and it demonstrates investment’s role in the negotiation of power between researcher and respondent.

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### 1. Introduction

In this paper I offer a reflective appraisal of positionalities in fieldwork by considering financial and gift investments I have made to interview respondents in the services sector while conducting research in Vietnam from 2002 to today. These types of investments are regular components of fieldwork, yet their relevance, deployment, and meaning have not been subject to serious intellectual attention in geography. In specific terms, I show how financial compensation and gifts “live” as arbitrators of fieldwork relations and shape interactions between interviewee and respondent. This paper illustrates the exercise of money and gift-giving in the conduct of fieldwork with the goal of adding to existing literature on reflexivity (Sultana, 2007; England, 1994), positionality and research design (Hopkins, 2007), and ethics (Price, 2012; Elwood, 2007; Martin, 2007) as well as studies on the social value of money (Zelizer, 1994), gifts (Eyben, 2006), and the politics of the field (Katz, 1994).

The emphasis in this paper is on the possibility of investments in the field (with an emphasis on overseas fieldwork) and the ways in which they act for both investigator and respondent and correspondingly are deployed by both researchers and research participants. The context by which American researcher and Vietnamese respondent understand financial compensation for time and knowledge, I argue, is a negotiated and emergent process in which neither party holds complete authority. In turn, it is a goal of this paper to demonstrate how financial and gift compensation informs everyday research interactions. An investment exchange indicates

for the investor a focus on the accumulation of savings (Escobar, 1995, p. 74) and for the recipient an ability to make other investments and a means of establishing credit. In my position in Vietnam offering investments can entail a “savings” that comes in the form of access to respondents and their “resources”, like time and knowledge; introduction to gatekeepers and information; and sustained cues and clues into the performances of localized social life. As I show below, the trade does not necessarily result in an acute form of exploitation and exclusion amounting to respondents being plied with resources in order to make them “talk” (Crang, 2005). Investments can support and advance respondent livelihoods. Symbolically, offerings such as money and gifts have the ability to indicate to respondents that their expertise has financial value and acknowledge the power that respondents have in determining the direction of the fieldwork relationship. Moreover, norms of reciprocity and exchange in Vietnam are often quite different from the universalizing standards of research proposals, ethics boards, and acceptable research values that promote certain forms of symbolic and knowledge exchange without recognizing how these “standards” constrict and in some cases destroy research opportunities. This paper, while recognizing that investments do not always result in benefits for both parties, reflects on how investment activities imbue the fieldwork experience with meaning, rescript interview spaces, and allow investigators and respondents to deploy different positionalities (Sultana, 2007, p. 379) in order to negotiate relationships at once familiar and foreign. Additionally, in a theme that will be taken up below, these positionalities are complicated by the Vietnamese system of person reference whereby age, gender, and kinship status position one’s status amidst individuals and groups (Luong, 1990).

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In connecting the everyday mores of fieldwork to the often abstract practices of research design (for example, proposal writing and Institutional Review Board vetting), this paper aims to address issues of positionality between researchers and respondents by contributing to Jackson's call to "transmute local into global knowledge" (1995, p. 4) through the writing up of fieldwork experiences. I do not intend to make the case for financial and knowledge investments between researchers and respondents because issuing payments and giving gifts are localized projects made only after critical reflection and evaluation. Additionally, this is not a "how to" guide seeking to outline how to incorporate investments into a research program: given the breadth and unconventionality of fieldwork experiences, establishing a predetermined methodological set prior to overseas fieldwork and executing it without deviation has already been proven problematic in other geographic methods research (Glassman, 2009; Hart, 2001). Investments in Vietnam are not considered established units of a preordained fieldwork plan but often arise on an ad hoc, serendipitous basis when securing and developing fieldwork interview relationships. Like the common practice among Vietnamese to compensate distinguished guests, officials, and relatives for attending certain functions such as weddings, death ceremonies, and official openings (which can be acknowledged with official receipts but are not reflected in official accounting ledgers), fieldwork in Vietnam frequently does not conform to the formal norms of scholarly fieldwork inquiry favored by university institutions in (to use the comparative example in this paper) North America.

Lastly, I acknowledge that people in every society exchange gifts and make payments to one another. Thus, although the socio-economic inequalities between American researcher and Vietnamese respondent factor into the analysis, it is not a central concern of the paper to question how "First" World researchers should conduct themselves ethically in the "Third" World field (Sidaway, 1992). My goals in this paper are more modest: I seek to introduce two broad types of investments as possible factors in conducting fieldwork, to imagine a fieldwork experience that incorporates some type of investment of the kind I describe, and to expand on and problematize researcher and respondent roles in the social valuation of money and gifts in fieldwork practices. Lastly, the paper seeks to link the multiple positionalities researchers inhabit as "authorities" in the scholarly and overseas field.

I begin the paper with a review of the literature on positionalities and the field in order to trace the many positions researchers occupy in the "ivory tower", in their relationships with Institutional Review Boards, and in the everyday exchanges between fieldworker and respondent. The goal in this section is to demonstrate the pliability and layered nature of positionalities in the design and implementation of fieldwork. The next section sketches out the idea of "investment" used in this paper and addresses the different positions at play for researchers and respondents working in Vietnam, where age, gender, and kinship roles all figure prominently in national language and in everyday practices. In particular, this section highlights the sociability and power of monetary and gift "investments" as they pertain to the conduct of Vietnamese fieldwork. In the empirical section I narrate stories of fieldwork in which investment opportunities were identified and undertaken, not all of them successfully. The consequences of introducing monetary and gift investments in the field are expanded upon in this section, illustrating how positions shift as a result of the introduction of these investments. In closing I discuss how monetary and gift exchange in the field may affect research outcomes and also make mention of how these investments provide opportunities for geographers to expand on how we distinguish between fieldwork and "real" life.

## 2. Positionalities, ethics, and the conduct of fieldwork

The scholarly literature reflecting on research methodologies in human geography has developed to such an extent that it is possible to distinguish between three broad positionalities inhabited by researchers as they progress through the organization and execution of overseas fieldwork. The first is the malleable positionality of investigative authority displayed by the researcher in the design of the research proposal. Generally written for a broad audience and with the anticipation that university, non-profit organization, and/or federal support agencies will fund noteworthy research, in this category of researcher positionality investigators must measure the pertinence of their research against its relative lack of engagement by others in their field of study (Abler and Baerwald, 1989). Investigators are expected to demonstrate that their expertise, experience, and desire to work overseas will yield a sufficient return on investment for funding agencies in the form of significant research findings, research publications, and closer cultural understanding.

More broadly, today funded research proposals in North America are often intended to have a transformative impact on society: funding agencies favor awarding work based on the expectation that it contribute to relevant social and policy issues (Robbins, 2011). Instead of previous iterations of scientific engagement, which rewarded esoteric language, detached observation, expansive measurement, and narrow findings, today's geographical inquiry is lively and engaged, suggesting that a commitment to the field and to field participants is necessary to make contributions that are holistic in style and impact (National Research Council, 2010). Inherent in these calls is that the researcher be prepared to connect important social issues with scholarly investigation, not simply to serve as a representative of the ivory tower among other voices weighing in on society's concerns. Researchers who frame themselves as more engaged and more aware of the overlapping demands of the academy and of the field would seem to be ideal participants in these contemporary research developments.

The second flexible positionality researchers exhibit in the design of fieldwork is their presentation of themselves and their research subjects to their university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Because the IRB is the ethical regulatory agency established by universities to "ensure the dignity, safety, and well-being of people and places involved in research" (Trudeau, 2012, p. 25), investigators conducting research on human subjects must demonstrate that they can manage the delicate project of safeguarding themselves and the lives of their respondents while generating valuable data for their own interests. This is problematic for researchers for two primary reasons. In the first place, researchers are aware that the IRB's regulatory regime enacts and enforces its policies in large part to protect its client (the university) from financial and reputational damages as much as it intends for research to be conducted in an ethical manner. Researchers who are obligated to subject their research to IRB evaluation thus understand that they may represent risk and harm to the university (Price, 2012).

For the purposes of this paper the second and more challenging concern for researchers appealing to the IRB to approve their research plan is that the IRB's universalizing ethical standards for conducting fieldwork with human subjects often do not account for the intricacies and complications of overseas relationship building during the research process. In publications outlining the disconnect between IRB protocols and fieldwork "on the ground", researchers frequently revert to individualistic "horror stories" to describe the often arbitrary nature of the IRB vetting process (Price, 2012), which does much to problematize the IRB's agenda but little to enhance its role in overseeing the conduct of ethical research.

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