



# Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Fieldwork: Journey, Value, and Pathway

Shihui Bao, Qing Tao\*

College of Philosophy, Law & Political Science, Shanghai Normal University, Shanghai 200234, China  
DOI: 10.32629/memf.v5i4.2561

**Abstract:** The research aims to explore the application and development of field surveys in interdisciplinary research. Initially, an overview of the historical background of field surveys is provided. Subsequently, the research discusses the significance of interdisciplinary research utilizing field surveys, primarily elucidating the importance from two perspectives: understanding the world and transforming it. Following this, the article proposes research pathways for interdisciplinary field surveys, encompassing problem orientation, bottom-up approaches, and holistic perspectives. This research aims to deepen understanding of field survey theory and offer a fresh perspective for interdisciplinary research.

**Keywords:** fieldwork; cross-cutting interdisciplinary research; cultural sciences

## 1. Fieldwork as an Interdisciplinary Research Trend

### 1.1 Fieldwork as an Anthropological Method

Fieldwork, as one of the research methods in anthropology, originated in late 19th-century Britain. Edward Burnett Tylor, known as the "father of anthropology," was a prominent figure in classical anthropology. In his book "Primitive Culture," published in 1871, Tylor felt the inadequacy of empiricism and scientificity.

Among early classical anthropologists, apart from Lewis Henry Morgan, who conducted extensive fieldwork among the Iroquois, most, such as Tylor and James George Frazer, were referred to as "armchair anthropologists." They mainly conducted selective sorting and analysis of second-hand, unreliable records collected by others, and then speculated on historical events based on cross-cultural comparisons.

At the end of the 19th century, Franz Boas, hailed as the "father of American anthropology," led an anthropologically significant expedition in Baffin Island and British Columbia. Bronisław Malinowski, due to factors such as the outbreak of World War I, was stranded in the Trobriand Islands region and utilized this time for a rigorous two-year-long "field" investigation. During this period, he used "Notes and Queries on Anthropology" as a guidebook, integrating "field" investigation with ethnographic writing, pioneering a new chapter in modern anthropology and "scientific ethnography" - "Ethnographic Realism." Fieldwork became the cornerstone and catalyst for anthropology's transition from classical abstraction to modern science, giving rise to empirical anthropology - "cultural science."

### 1.2 The Rise of Interdisciplinary Fieldwork

Fieldwork is not only the prerogative of anthropology but also more or less exists in multiple disciplines such as political science, history, economics, and drama, forming various interdisciplinary fields such as political anthropology, historical anthropology, dramatic anthropology, and educational anthropology.

Historians have lamented, Using anthropological field methods to supplement the lack of detail in historical research, and using historical literature to add to the anthropological sense of historical context."Dramatic anthropology is a discipline that applies methods from drama studies and cultural anthropology to study dramatic phenomena and their early forms to reveal the laws of human social development. Educational anthropology involves theories, methodologies, substantive themes, interesting questions, and methods from various disciplines, including anthropology, ethnography, sociolinguistics, and symbolic interactionism.

The intersection and integration of these theories not only contribute to the formation of complete theoretical systems within specific research areas but also further enrich the theoretical structure of cultural anthropology.

## 2. The Significance of Interdisciplinary Research Utilizing Fieldwork

### 2.1 Understanding the World

Fieldwork under the interdisciplinary perspective can obtain multidimensional data and deeper understanding, thus providing a more comprehensive perspective and effective solutions for solving complex social problems. In the process

of exploring and understanding the world, Mao Zedong pointed out profoundly in his article "Oppose Book Worship," "Without investigation, there is no right to speak." Fieldwork conducted in interdisciplinary fields should progress from "seeing flowers on horseback" to "dismounting to see flowers," and then to "dismounting to plant flowers." From "riding" to "dismounting," from "seeing flowers" to "planting flowers," is a process of continuous exploration towards depth, reaching the triple realm of seeing, hearing, and experiencing firsthand, and it is also a dynamic and ongoing method of observing and understanding the world. As scholars have said, "Going to the countryside with a questionnaire may bring back relatively formal answers. But these formally correct answers are mostly not true." The journey of fieldwork is never in vain. Walking is entering practice, entering the source of theory.

## **2.2 Transforming the World**

Genuine fieldwork is not for self-appreciation or for a select few; neither should it indulge in ivory tower-style academic communication. On the contrary, the results of fieldwork should pursue practical applications, enabling them to integrate into and influence the world. The goal of research is not only to broaden our understanding of the world but also to provide profound guidance and lead us in the direction of transforming the world. Building into field research a component that would be responsible to community needs requires alteration in both the design of research and in the scope of field activities. In addition to specific research questions and needs, the fieldworker would also have to assess the nature of sociopolitical activity related to change within the group.

## **3. Research Path of Interdisciplinary Fieldwork**

### **3.1 Problem Orientation**

Fieldwork under the interdisciplinary perspective should be problem-oriented, focusing on understanding the complexity of problems. Generally speaking, research questions form a complex system that goes beyond the boundaries of a single discipline. "Simply put, the existence of things is based on their intrinsic rules rather than disciplinary divisions, while our disciplinary divisions are mostly based on the surface phenomena of things, whether 'politics,' 'economics,' 'history,' 'human,' or 'society.' ... In fact, the exploration behind the phenomenon (including the awareness of 'problems') is transcendent." Researchers obtain specific instances through fieldwork and then integrate abstract knowledge with concrete instances, hoping to explore phenomena in depth with a transcendent perspective gained from practice.

### **3.2 Bottom-up Approach**

Fieldwork emphasizes first-hand materials and highlights the dynamics of reality. It values research based on primary materials to correct or enrich existing theories and understandings. While some quantitative datasets can be acquired easily, others require months of effort, such as communicating with officials, searching through archives, or accompanying data-entry personnel in field surveys. Therefore, fieldwork demands time, effort, patience, and persistence. However, it can offer humanized perspectives and deeper insights that quantitative research cannot attain. Existing disciplinary knowledge still plays a role, but firsthand data from the field, fresh experiences from practice, can potentially challenge existing disciplinary theories or hypotheses. In summary, interdisciplinary fieldwork underlines a bottom-up, generative approach, often guided by empiricism, emphasizing the acquisition of firsthand data and original thinking on research questions from a holistic perspective.

### **3.3 Holistic Perspective**

Fieldwork seeks to gain a holistic perspective of a social domain, considering the diversity of viewpoints on issues. It breaks the self-imposed limitations of existing disciplinary frameworks in scholars' minds, challenging the depth of research in the real, diverse social domains. For example, traditional anthropological fieldwork methods have encountered some problems, with individual anthropologists facing increasing suspicion and difficulty accessing core resources, making it harder to engage in local events. In the industrialized era of academic production, many scholars are seeking interdisciplinary teamwork to explore more holistic and complex issues. Anthropology has always emphasized understanding society and culture from a holistic perspective. Whether it is environmental or structural research, they are parts of the complex puzzle of social sciences. Treating these parts separately may overlook their interconnections and functions, thus failing to achieve a comprehensive understanding of phenomena. Social science research should not be limited to a single perspective or methodology. The interaction between environmental and structural research implies the need to integrate theories and methods from different disciplines to understand social phenomena more comprehensively. Therefore, the fieldworker enters these communities with the need to develop personal relationships, rapport, and key informants. Relationships are built on a growing knowledge of appropriate expectations, the sharing of experiences, exchanges of favors, and other kinds of

personal reciprocities. To achieve these approximations of group membership, anthropologists have helped with the harvest, participated in sports and games, danced and drunk, given people rides, and helped at times of personal and community crisis. Such participant observation is as much a part of the ethnographic method as field notes, interview schedules, and kinship genealogy.

## References

---

- [1] Appadurai, Arjun. Disjuncture and difference in the global cultural economy[J]. *Theory, culture & society*, 1990, 7(2-3): 295-310.
- [2] Bourgois, Philippe. Conjugated Oppression: Class and Ethnicity Among Kuna and Guaymi Banana Workers on a Corporate Plantation[J]. *American Ethnologist*, 1982, 2: 328-348.
- [3] Clifford, James. On ethnographic surrealism[J]. *Comparative studies in society and history*, 1981, 23(4): 539-564.
- [4] Fenno, Richard F. *Home style: House members in their districts*[M]. Boston: Little, Brown, 1978.
- [5] Harding, Sandra. Is there a feminist method[J]. *Social research methods: A reader*, 1987, 1(45): 456-464.