**Linked Life Courses in Fieldwork: Researcher, Participant, and Field**

Nathaniel M. Lewis

Lecturer in Human Geography

University of Southampton

2058 Shackleton, Highfield Campus

Southampton UK SO17 1BJ

N.M.Lewis@soton.ac.uk

**Introduction: The Life Course and the Field**

Critical human geographers have become increasingly interested in the social dynamics of the research process (Bondi 2003, 2005). More than two decades of work in human geography suggests that the exchanges of emotions involved in fieldwork are relational and intersubjective (Gilbert 1994; Hyndman 2001; Bennett 2004; Sultana 2007; Billo and Hiemstra 2013), meaning that how the exchange is felt and interpreted depends on the accrued subjectivities of researchers and participants. Several feminist geography collections, including those edited by Katz and Monk (1993), Nast (1994), and Moss (2001), also emphasize the centrality of life trajectory in shaping these fieldwork exchanges. In this brief article, I suggest that both specific fieldwork encounters and the development of the broader research projects they comprise are informed by the ways that life courses of researchers, participants, and the field itself become intertwined during fieldwork. For early career researchers, the tensions between these strands pose productive research opportunities as well as difficult challenges.

Life course theory, popularised by sociologist Glen Elder Jr. (1985, 2003) as an alternative to biological and stage-sequential human development frameworks, suggests that life trajectories are shaped by both age and historical context. Geographers have explored the spatial implications of the life course framework, suggesting that places and the institutions located within them (e.g., schools and workplaces) can perpetuate geometries of power that influence that influence how human lives unfold (Bailey 2009; Worth 2009; Lewis 2014a). At the same time, geographically co-located life courses may still differ considerably by ethnicity, class, and sexuality (Finney 2011; Wimark 2016a). The life courses of researchers and participants not only linked temporarily or professionally in specific field sites (Elder Jr. et al. 2003), they also co-evolve as part of the broader fields they comprise.

Yet academic researchers and the research they conduct are still described in path-dependent terms such as ‘advancement’ and ‘life cycle’ (Åkerlind et al. 2008; Nicholson 2011), mirroring the stage-sequential understandings of human development that life course theory originally sought to upend. Geography graduate programs have also evolved to emphasize more skills and professional competencies (Solem et al. 2008), often leaving less time for the development of rigour within research itself (Åkerlind 2008; Evans 2011). Similarly, researchers are exposed to systems of metrics in which advancement and promotion are more dependent on the generation, completion, and productivity of research projects than on professional evolution (Hardwick et al. 2005). Junior researchers, especially in the Anglo-American context, now often balance PhD completion, short-term jobs, and even disciplinary shifts while attempting to maintain consistent publication records.

The life courses of research participants also remain under-theorised. Many social scientists continue to position the life trajectories and patterns of research participants as findings in and of themselves rather than influences *upon* research findings or methodologies. Life course research on groups such as prisoners and drug users, for example, often traces sequences of events *following* incarceration or rehabilitation without considering how the diverse life paths that *precede* these events might also affect onward outcomes in counselling or return-to-work programmes (Patenaude 2004; Evans et al. 2013). At the same time, a growing body of work linking historical context, social environment, and life events across generational divides (Hopkins and Pain 2007) has provided new opportunities for more dynamic and relational understandings of research participants’ lives.

The field, along with the researcher and participant, constitutes a third party in the relational exchange of fieldwork. While many accounts of the field focus on locations a significant distance from the researcher’s home (e.g., Schuermans and Newton 2012; Madiega 2013), others investigate everyday professional and institutional sites such as courts, archives, and offices (Gilbert 1994; Bergman Blix and Wettergren 2015). It is difficult, however, to separate ‘home’ and ‘field’ in either case because researchers themselves constitute links in the power relations that comprise the field (Hyndman 2001; Massey 2003) and often have personal connections to the places they are studying (Sultana 2007). While researchers may have knowledge of the field prior to encountering it, the individuals, networks, and institutions that make up the field also retain memories of past events including previous research exchanges. In this sense, fieldwork is influenced not just by the ‘biographies’ of researchers (England 1994; Lawson 1995), but also those of research participants and the field itself (Wimark 2016b).

The life course of the field, as it refers to individual academic disciplines or the academic profession itself, may act as a fourth life course strand that animates the interaction of the other three during fieldwork. While the various academic disciplines have diverse historical trajectories of popular theories and methods (e.g., Nerone 2012), there is a growing consensus that academia generally is becoming more marketized and competitive (Mountz et al. 2015). Fieldwork thus becomes a site where early career anxieties play out and the co-occurring life courses of researchers, participants, and field may clash (see also Sultana 2007; Billo and Hiemstra 2013). I explore these challenges through three early-career research projects: a PhD on migration decision-making among North American gay men, a postdoctoral project on the social dynamics of HIV risk and prevention in Nova Scotia, Canada, and a research internship on HIV prevention among gay immigrant men in Ontario, Canada.

**My Researcher Life Course**

In 2007, I entered my PhD planning to continue my research on the settlement and integration experiences of immigrants to Canada using secondary data analysis. As the time to draft a thesis proposal drew near, I shifted my focus to the internal migration experiences of gay men. Given that I was a gay man who had grown up across a range of urban and rural locales in North America, the change was in retrospect an attempt to align my research with a population I felt uniquely positioned to study (see England 1994). As I eventually discovered, however, my participants would have intersecting class, race, and age subjectivities different from my own. In summer 2009, I began piloting interviews for a project on the migration histories of gay men living in Ottawa, Canada, and Washington, D.C., U.S.A. Previously trained and ‘socialized’ as a population geographer (see Lawson 1995), I structured my pilot interview schedule much like a demographic survey, asking my interviewees close-ended questions about indicators of their well-being (e.g., mental health, sleep patterns, social life) before and after migrating. After completing his interview, a colleague informed me that I was conducting the interview like ‘a researcher with a capital R’ rather than someone keen to co-produce knowledge with his participants.

Although co-production was a new concept for me, I revised my questions to glean more open-ended, detailed accounts of sexual identity, coming out, migration and well-being across the participants’ lives. It was only after hearing from several older participants who had read some of the resulting publications that I truly understood the value of co-production.

I agree essentially with the analysis you have about [Ottawa’s gay] Village. It is, indeed, more symbolic than a lived reality. I have always argued that becoming visible is our greatest challenge and the signs and flags are really valuable in this struggle … I really appreciate your analysis that our Village grew not organically but because of the absence of a Village this late in our history. It is very definitely in a state of evolution and we’ll see what happens (Boris, 70, white, Ottawa).

This was a very positive experience. Any type of project or action that helps to identify the journey of how and why the GLBT community has gotten to where we are now, is of great value. Being able to contribute my experiences and insights was much appreciated (James, 59, white, Ottawa).

Engaging in discussion and feedback with these participants had not only validated my revised approach, which was itself the suggestion of a midlife participant, it also revealed the advantage of departing from a research life course that had seemed pre-determined by my positivist training (Lawson 1995). In a sense, my research participants also became inter-generational mentors who helped me to see the value in my research, tailor it to elicit the types of narratives they sensed I was looking for, and place it in a broader context of queer history in North America.

In 2011, faced with entering the no-man’s land between PhD graduation and a tenure-track job, I began searching for a postdoc. Without eligibility for the Social Science and Humanities Research Council, the typical funding stream for Canadian human geographers, I turned to the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR). Although my PhD project was not health geography *per se*, it explored the mental and sexual health issues (e.g., coming out, depression, encountering new social and sexual scenes) that precede and follow migration for gay men (see Lewis 2014b). Since CIHR had a specific funding stream for HIV-related research and I had found a willing mentor at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, I proposed a sexual health research project on a region that many of my PhD research participants had moved from. Here, I would examine linkages between rural homophobia, the impetus to move away, and the health risks (re-) encountered after moving to unfamiliar cities such as Toronto or Vancouver.

When I got the postdoc, I had begun to feel confident as a sexualities researcher but was entering new terrain as a ‘trainee’ in health promotion. Here, migration was framed less as a matter of sexual subjectivity and identity, and more as one component of larger ‘ecological’ models of health that included gender, class, age, and landscapes of health information and services. At the various workshops, institutes, and internships that comprised my academic *re*-socialisation, I began paying careful attention to how other sexual health researchers were framing their work. If, for example, depression and HIV were co-occurring ‘syndemics’ among gay men (Stall et al. 2008), could migration, life course disruption, and social isolation also be ‘syndemic’ with HIV? Taking cues from the other researchers, I learned to frame the broader life trajectories of individual gay men in epidemiologic terms (Lewis 2015).

This new approach would become problematic, however, when I began a research internship examining HIV risk and prevention among gay and bisexual immigrants to Canada. My participants, who included clinicians but also advocates and counsellors, were not always keen to engage with the deterministic framings of ‘risk’ and ‘behaviour’ in that I had adopted in my (re-) training as a health scientist. Many served historically oppressed queer-of-colour communities in Canada and many were also members of communities they served. Consequently, the participants sometimes saw my questions about deficit-based ‘determinants’ of HIV risk such as language difficulties and isolation as reinforcements of social marginalisation rather than necessities of ‘scientific’ inquiry.

Moreover, HIV prevention research had recently evolved to incorporate theories of *resilience* rather than just risk. For example, interventions among ethnic minority gay men were increasingly focusing on ways to build social support rather than just trying to increase condom use (see Adam et al. 2011). Rather than attempting to slot my participants into my theoretically pre-determined research plan (see Billo and Hiemstra 2013), I allowed them to articulate the factors that most influenced prevention in the specific groups they served. One participant suggested that the new emphasis on resilience was the result of changing life potentials for Latino gay men amidst growing acceptance from their own ethnic communities.

I was promoting [a Latino gay youth support program] … in Pickering [Ontario] and a mother called, not the son … and she said ‘hey, would you please have my son in your group, because I want him to be educated?’ and I thought it was very progressive because, a mother was like, my son is gay, and if he is going to be gay he is going to meet other gay people and he gets educated formally in a programme. So, I think we are going to start to see more cases like that … in terms of … new generations … like the condom is not the answer anymore … we’re moving as the HIV field is moving in Canada (Latino men’s HIV and sexual health counsellor, 30s, Toronto).

In health services research, where practices evolve quickly and the input of the practitioner is necessary, the field educatesthe researcher as much as the researcher assesses the field. Judging the field (Massey 2003), then, is not just an exercise in ‘smoothing out’ the process of extracting information, but actively listening in order to understand the lived realities of the participants.

**Research Participants and their Life courses**

During my PhD research, participants frequently shared experiences that helped me to see gay history and the gay life course as fundamentally linked. Under moralistic postwar government administrations, both Ottawa and Washington, D.C. had become centres of homophobic sentiment and regulation in the 1950s and 1960s. They also became centres of gay rights movements in the 1970s and 1980s, where newcomers ‘came out’ into activism through organisations such as Gays of Ottawa, the Mattachine Society, and the Gay Liberation Front.

What I sought in the community [in the early 1980s] … was, you know, acceptance … at that time when I moved here … it was starting to grow … and the things that I probably expected or sought were the things that I was creating or helping to create. We were some of the pioneers who established them. (Jeff, 56, African Canadian, Ottawa).

I can remember having a conversation with somebody about why there aren’t more out senior civil servants in the federal government, and the man who I was talking to said, “… there is this perception … of a pink ceiling in the federal government, and therefore you really don’t want to be terribly out otherwise you’ll hit the pink ceiling.” (Bill, 47, white, Ottawa)

Through these narratives, I learned that migration for was not a panacea to social marginalization among gay men (i.e., the way in which ‘it gets better’), but a nexus characterised by both individual resilience and ongoing hardship.

In my second project, I found myself trying to provide a qualitative ‘answer’ to the extant research on HIV risk among rurally situated men. While an interview-based project was certainly more sensible than a large-scale survey or intervention study given the timeline and financial constraints of my fellowship, it lacked the emotional distance of these approaches and I hesitated to ask participants directly about sexual experiences, substance use, or other topics that would speak back to biomedical studies. Occasionally, participants volunteered these types of details.

Whenever I would go on these [work] trips and I used to turn into this other being, you know before I would even get to the hotel, I would actually head to the steam bath. And so I was in a marriage … I just needed to get all I could in those five days because I’m going back to little never, never land in Truro, Nova Scotia again and I’m going to live this life that I have to live (Joe, 56, white, Nova Scotia).

Most participants, however, answered my safely open-ended queries with more general accounts of sex education, coming out, or going to get tested. I eventually discovered, however, that these narratives were not just inferior substitutes for the more behavioural data I *thought* I needed to get. They often revealed the geographic and temporally contingent factors (e.g., anti-HIV stigma, lack of prevention messaging) that might lead to more proximal risk behaviours later in life.

When I joined [a professional figure skating] tour even the company that was employing had brought in somebody to do a safer sex talk. I don’t know if that was the first time they had done it … I already knew more than was presented that day because it was kind of a little too safe and generic but I remember that was part of the climate at the time. (Jake, 55, white, Nova Scotia).

These types of narratives suggested that HIV could not be framed simply as the product of ‘urban’ or ‘rural’ collections of risk factors; rather, it was contingent upon how individual lives had unfolded over time and across place.

For my third project, I anticipated that the researcher-participant dynamic would be immediately more comfortable. Before entering the field, I had ‘identified’ (Bondi 2003) my service provider participants rather narrowly as like-minded professionals who would happily comply with the interview schedule as I had written it. Many, however, pushed back against questions they saw as potentially essentialist.

[Answering a question whether immigrants have higher HIV risk than second and third generation men]: Well, one, I think it’s a complicated question to ask without trying to narrow those experiences into one narrative … I just wanted to put that out there, it’s just sort of a caution that I don’t want to create this singular narrative (gay men’s health government liaison, 40s, Toronto).

[Answering a question about immigrants’ preferences for ethno-specific rather than ‘mainstream’ support services]: Folks that are queer and South Asian but don’t want to identify with that culture won’t access our spaces … That can be down to internalised racism … generally most people we see do want to maintain a connection with their culture … there is this …“I’m going to cover my accent as much as possible because that is what I’ve been forced to do for most of my life, but I’m going to like kind of giggle when someone says something that is very culturally relevant” (South Asian HIV outreach coordinator, 30s, Toronto).

As expert practitioners, my participants were empowered to both speak in technical terms and to reject or revise questions that they felt were inadequate or incomplete. Negotiating these situations was occasionally challenging and I sometimes asked myself why a ‘peer’ would want to keep me from the data had agreed to provide. While I had begun to understand the idea of participants as co-producers when I started my PhD research, it was not until this third project where I *lived* co-production by negotiating and maintaining access to the field (see Bergman Blix and Wettergren 2015).

**The Life course of the Field: Gay Communities, HIV, and Health Services**

When I began a funded PhD in the late 2000s, I was relatively unaware of the oncoming economic recession and neoliberal transformation of higher education (my *professional* field) that was already underway in North America. Relatively anxiety-free, I entered the *research* field prepared to engage in a truly exploratory project with significant time for participant observation and the development of grounded theory. Four years later, it was far more difficult to achieve the same level of rigour during a two-year postdoctoral ‘traineeship’ where I had to learn the fundamentals of a new discipline, create a new research project, and present and publish the findings. Moreover, many of the issues I was trying to research (e.g., HIV stigma and underfunding in Nova Scotia) themselves became barriers to recruitment as many potential participants initially refused interviews. While I expected to be received as an insider doing HIV research at a local institution (Dalhousie University), I was still seen as a researcher from ‘away’ (see Gilbert 1994; Madiega et al. 2013) who might carelessly reinforce the emerging perception of Nova Scotia as a health services ‘backwater’ (see Moreira 2012).

Many service providers had also experienced the years of in-fighting among Halifax’s AIDS service organizations (ASOs) competing for limited HIV prevention funding (see Lewis 2015) and often seemed wary of sharing knowledge outside of their own institutions. One participant described an institutional culture of silence around HIV in Nova Scotia.

The Atlantic region in and of itself, our HIV, our prevalence is quite low, we’re not part of the big three [Montreal, Vancouver, and Toronto], in any way, shape or form … there’s often a perception that there’s no HIV here ergo there’s no risk … [in other cities] there’s posters for testing all over the place. Like you don’t see that here … it’s, our major institutions … schools, family, the church … are you familiar with the sex book? … It’s a resource the teachers can access but it’s up to the school board and the school if that happens or not. Some boards chose that they would go to the students but give it in a brown paper bag and taken home. And other boards, no way (HIV/AIDS government liaison, 40s, Halifax).

Similarly, individual gay men who had experienced the sex book controversy and other events in local schools (e.g., several prominent court cases regarding termination of gay or lesbian-identified and HIV-positive teachers) may have seen engaging with an HIV research project as stigmatising or incriminating.

The [gay community in Halifax] is like an exaggeration of how small communities gather … if you think about any other marginalized community, there’s often lots of [competition] within it … And it’s part of the norm to do that. To create the team, close the team, talk about the other teams … if I go down to [the gay bar], a lot of people would choose not to communicate with me, which is totally okay because they’d have to explain why do you know me right? (HIV/AIDS agency director, 40s, Halifax)

On the one hand, it was easy to interpret these narratives as ‘proof’ of the backwater stereotype.

On the other hand, the sex book controversy was not a product of ‘backward’ thinking, but anxieties over acknowledging a public health threat in a province with an aging population and fewer economic resources than Ontario or British Columbia. With these anxieties in mind, I began a secondary review project to demonstrate the necessity and desirability of rapid point-of-care HIV testing in Nova Scotia (Lewis et al. 2013). Since the service was not yet funded in Nova Scotia, the broader field of AIDS service providers in Nova Scotia saw the value in the project and ultimately began to trust me as a researcher (see also Hyndman 2001).

My third project on HIV prevention among gay immigrants required working with ASOs created in response to the white hegemony in HIV/AIDS services and legacies of disinvestment in queer of colour communities in Canada (Catungal 2013). While these Toronto- and Ottawa-based ASOs were arguably more integrated with the research community than those in Nova Scotia, they had also grown weary of researchers seeking to fulfill funding agency mandates by integrating ‘knowledge users’ and intersectional perspectives into their projects. My efforts to recruit a participant from one agency were rebuffed politely several times:

Email 1: Our research team had a further discussion in regards to your research project. While we believe it is an important research project since … there’s little research done in this area, our staff resources and time are being fully allocated on our own research project … As we’re not sure what kind of involvement and capacity you require of us in this project, we’re unable to make any commitment at this stage.

Email 2: I apologize for the delay and thank you for your patience. Our research team has decided that at this stage we are unable to support you on this particular research project since we need all hands on deck to finalize our resiliency research project.

Email 3: Unfortunately, at this time we are unable to assist you with the interview since our staff time and resources are stretched during the holiday season. We wish you all the best in your research.

At the time, I found this experience unnerving. Was it a misunderstanding? Had the potential participant thought I was asking for long-term involvement when all I was requesting was an interview? Although engaging knowledge users (e.g., through meetings and closing conferences) over the course of a project was becoming accepted ‘best practice’ in funded Canadian health research, it had seemed incongruous with a small-scale, short-term internship-based project.

The exchange challenged my tacit (and ill-conceived) assumption of a right to the field. Given that this particular field comprised frontline workers who had their own research agendas in communities where they were already intimately connected, it was understandable that my research project was not a high priority. It is also possible, however, that the interests of academia, funders, and health care providers had evolved in a way that complicated the act of ‘research participation’. Agencies now accustomed to enrolling in funded research projects as full-time knowledge users rightfully balk at single interview requests without a clear in-kind contribution or funded dissemination pathway such as a technical report or intervention (see also Sultana 2007). In the current research climate, new researchers must therefore consider the motives and attachments of the individuals and institutions that make up their chosen field sites.

**Conclusions**

As understandings of fieldwork become increasingly relational, so too should those of the various ‘biographies’ that comprise the field. Human geographical fieldwork is essentially a confluenceof three life course strands—researcher, participant, and field—with each strand influenced in some way by the other two. As interlocutors of the field, research participants also become educators of the researcher. In addition to interpreting the immediate sites of the fieldwork, participants also articulate broader cultural histories that are often nominally shared by but not fully *known to* the researcher (see also Sultana 2007). In fieldwork involving professional informants and ‘expert’ interviews, participants may also call on their own expertise to question or even counter the researcher. In these cases, the field-as-research site, where the researcher often assumes primacy, may overlap with the field-as-discipline (where he or she cannot). Similarly, participants who have had a hand in creating the organizations or networks being researched may have a vested interest in how their life’s work is portrayed in academic work. Just as fieldwork is a professional endeavour for the researcher that is also influenced by their personal life (England 1994), the research participant’s involvement in fieldwork can constitute a professional engagement as well as a personal one.

The life course perspective is particularly useful for understanding the career trajectories of young researchers in a time of uncertainty and competition in the neoliberal academy (Billo and Hiemstra 2013; Mountz et al. 2015). Junior researchers now frequently pursue opportunities across disciplines to survive into the ‘next’ (but not necessarily pre-given) career stage. In this sense, a researcher’s demonstrated ability to adapt to logistical circumstances (e.g., eligibility for funding by a health council but not a social science council) should perhaps now be valued more in the academic job market than a perfectly cohesive research narrative. Some early career researchers, however, may not benefit from the unexpected learning opportunities that extended fieldwork offers because output requirements may compel them to collect data quickly, leave the field, and begin writing up results. Productivity imperatives not only elide the reality that research is a process rather than a product (England 1994), they are also out of line with funding guidelines that require co-production, knowledge translation, and real-world ‘impact’ through non-academic research partnerships. Young academics, who must continue to produce even when they lack funding or permanent positions, may not have the time of resources to build these types of partnerships.

In this sense, the life course of the academic profession is increasingly out of sync with that of the research field and the various institutions within it that seek greater utility and accountability in research (Mountz et al. 2015). This account of geographic fieldwork can therefore also be read as one of survival in a rapidly shifting academic landscape. While the completion of various research projects can be read as success, the negotiation of oppositional interests accrued by the various actors that make up the field can leave early career researchers feeling as though they are progressing by the skin of their teeth. Further reflexive interventions into the relationships between fieldwork and the life course can thus reveal both the productive tensions of the field and the limits of new regimes of academic production.

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