game environments

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Learning to Do Fieldwork through Role-Playing. A Class Experiment

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Abstract
Social scientists use fieldwork research to collect data to understand, observe, and interact with people in their natural settings. Most researchers learn fieldwork methods by doing and find that, however valuable, the publications on the subject are a poor substitute for the actual experience. So how can students and young researchers acquire these skills when limited time, lack of funding or a global pandemic prevent them from reaching the field? The game introduced here proposes to teach fieldwork practices through immersive role-playing. Game participants assume the roles of social scientists and have to complete their research projects by overcoming a series of typical fieldwork challenges, from making the appropriate preparations to finding respondents, from conducting interviews to treating data correctly and facing emergencies. Played for the first time with a group of undergraduate students at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, the game constitutes a safe, easy, and cost-effective way to familiarize young researchers with the methods and difficulties of field research.

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Fieldwork is a qualitative method of data collection used by social scientists to understand, observe, and interact with people in their natural settings. Traditionally, researchers learn fieldwork practices from experience, as well as through individual tutoring. However, limited time and funding for research stays have reduced opportunities for learning in the field, while the COVID-19 pandemic further curtailed global travel. Furthermore, publications on the subject, though useful, cannot substitute the experience. With its immersive quality, a role-playing game seems a suitable instrument to train a set of skills usually learned by doing.

Background

The idea of using a role-playing game to teach fieldwork methods and risks came to me in 2019, when I taught an undergraduate seminar on *Authoritarianism in the Global Age* at the Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich. I was at the Sociology department and had a very dynamic and diverse group of 25 students: almost half of them were internationals, who were studying in Munich thanks to exchange programs. Many studied sociology as their minor subject, and their majors ranged from political science, to communication studies, philosophy and geography. Although several of the students expressed an interest in continuing their academic training with a Master's degree or a doctorate, most of them had no previous experiences of fieldwork and little knowledge about it.

Two things prompted me to introduce fieldwork methods and related risks as a subject. First, during the semester, we discussed several articles based on field research in various authoritarian countries. I thought that some knowledge of the fieldwork process itself would be a valuable addition to their critical understanding of the literature.

Second, the topic of fieldwork methods, ethics and risks in the social sciences is very important but often little discussed. I had previously worked as a postdoctoral researcher for the ERC-funded project *Authoritarianism in a Global Age*, at the University of Amsterdam. While preparing for our own field research, my colleagues and I became aware of the scarcity of publications on fieldwork addressing the specific need of political scientists working in authoritarian contexts and ended up writing our own book, "Research, Ethics and Risk in the Authoritarian Field" (Glasius et al. 2018). We also tried to get to a wider audience and debunk some myths about field research in the social sciences by publishing a series of comic strips based on the book (Del Sordi and Public Cinema 2018).[i] I saw the game as a further way to reach, inform and train students and young researchers on this topic.

As per my group in Munich, the initial idea was to assign chapters of the book to the students and have a discussion session. The book is written in a narrative style and is, indeed, very engaging, but I found that it mostly resonates with readers who, differently from my class participants, have some experience with doing research first hand. Hence, I had the idea of giving students an immersive experience through role playing and transforming the most common fieldwork challenges into games and puzzles to solve. I must admit, my approach was initially naïve. I did not have much experience with using games as a learning tool – besides organizing conference simulations – and I was not aware of the potential of role-playing games in particular as a didactic instrument. A literature search, however, reassured me of the validity of this approach and provided a better basis for this class experiment.

The game

Besides information from the volume "Research, Ethics and Risk in the Authoritarian Field" (Glasius et al. 2018), the knowledge base of the game is my own expertise as qualitative political science researcher with more than 10 years research experience, with a regional focus on Kazakhstan.

The game is structured as follows: participants are required to assume the roles of researchers in different disciplines within the social sciences, with different levels of experience and knowledge of the country they have to visit for their studies. In order to advance, participants face several challenges, which loosely follow the book's chapters: these include making appropriate preparations, structuring their materials as to avoid especially sensitive terminology, working their way up through a network of contacts to reach the most relevant respondents, assessing/correcting difficult interview situations, treating their data correctly and facing unexpected problems. The goal of the game is to complete one's research project.

The materials include character sheets, used also to keep track of points, cards for the individual challenges, dice (two 10-sided dice and two storytelling dice), as well as a timer. In the paragraphs below the game's components will be described in more detail and accompanied by some reflections on their goals, efficacy and possible improvements. I will specifically refer to the two-hours session we had with my class in Munich in June 2019.

Characters

To start, each group of students was given a character sheet. On the front, the sheet described the character in terms of discipline, academic rank, level of experience, nationality, gender, personality traits, ability to speak the local language, research

question, physical strength and personal connections to the visited country. On the back there was a table quantifying the character's strengths in those areas. For instance, the most experienced and high-ranking academic in the game had higher *Academic Connection* points but a lower *Understanding the Local Context* score when compared to a PhD student who is from the area and a native speaker of the language. These points were taken into account when facing the challenges. For the sake of simplification, all the participants were visiting the same country (I chose Kazakhstan) but their researches were different. A possible improvement would be to state that more characters belong to the same research group, to explore cooperation among players. An alternative would be to give them similar research goals but different institutions to participants, in order to introduce an element of competition.

Challenges

For the first step, participants had to select the appropriate methodology for the research questions they had been assigned, most of which belonged to the qualitative methods family (expert and in-depth interviews, content analysis, survey, participant observation and informal interviews). Their second challenge was to choose the best preparation measures that their characters would need to make the most of their field trip (options included ethics or methods seminars, language classes, spending an extra week in the field prior to the research stay). Just as in real life, training and getting extra knowledge gave them an opportunity to improve in the areas where their characters showed more weakness. Successful choosing would lead them to improve their characters' score in those dimensions.

I called the third challenge *Red-Lights Taboo*. *Red lights* define the delicate border zone around impermissible political activity in authoritarian contexts (Ahram and

Goode 2016, 840). For researchers this could mean having to avoid certain topics or restrain the terminology of their survey questions or interview scripts, or simply of the way they introduce themselves to the community they are studying. The use of sensitive terminology might in fact signal the research as problematic and limit the researcher's access to respondents (when not causing worse consequences, such as deportation or even detention). The rules of this challenge follow those of the popular board game *Taboo*. Participants in turn picked a card containing a word that the other participants had to guess and four more words that needed to be avoided in the explanation. In this phase of the game, characters collaborated, trying to guess as many as possible terms and sharing the points. The goal of this challenge was to make students reflect on the way a research is presented and to thread the fine line between presenting one's research honestly and avoiding particularly sensitive terms.

In the fourth challenge participants had to recruit respondents for their study by using the sampling method known as snowball: researchers start by contacting a small number of potential respondents and inviting them to participate to the research. Those who agree are then asked to recommend other contacts who fit the research criteria and who may wish to be part of the research, who then in turn recommend other potential participants, and so on (Parker, Scott and Geddes 2019). For the challenge, I put respondents of increasing importance on a chain, meaning that only a successful meeting with the first one would lead to an introduction with the second, and so forth. To reach the next-level respondent, participants had to roll the dice to reach a certain value. Influencing factors were the character's abilities (local access, language knowledge, and rank) and the correct answer to some questions, but the outcome was left partly to chance. This had the goal to show students that access to respondents depends on many factors, including of course

their skills and positionality as researchers, but that even in similar conditions there might be some random factors facilitating or preventing the connection.

The fifth challenge had the goal of exposing participants to details and difficulties of the interview process. I presented excerpts from difficult interview situations and participants had to point out what was going wrong and how they proposed to proceed to continue the interview. Interview scenarios included: dealing with confrontational respondents, trying to bring the conversation back to the topic, facing harsh criticism of their own credentials. This exercise used real life situations and was originally devised to help graduate students learning about interview techniques – another skill that is very hard to transmit if not by practice.[ii] I decided to include it in this game to give students a taste of the interview process (interviewing is used by a wide range of qualitative researchers), and to show them some of the possible difficulties that can be encountered. Moreover, the exercise was a chance for participants to use creativity, their listening skills, emotional intelligence and ability to react quickly.

For the sixth and last challenge, participants were asked to match different types of respondents with different levels and techniques of anonymization and to motivate their choice. In this case no list of possibilities was given, only the different types of respondents (ranging from public figures speaking in their official capacity, to opposition politician, to survey participants to members of vulnerable communities). Students were invited to reflect on the different ways data can be treated and how to make sure to find the best balance between the opposite needs for transparency and protection of respondents.

At the very end, we had a round of *Face the Unexpected*. Employing story-telling dice (with different symbols on each face, representing various difficult scenarios), each character rolled an unexpected occurrence and had to develop a strategy to solve it. Each situation had a different level of difficulty, also quantified in points, and participants had to roll the dice in order to see whether their proposed strategy would work. Extra points would be assigned or deducted based on their character's features. Most unexpected situations were from real life and were taken from the book or colleagues' anecdotes: they included illnesses, emergencies, encounters with hostile authorities, losing interview records and so on. The students had to think outside the box to find solutions to the situation. In addition, they could also reflect on how preventive measures could have mitigated those risks.

Successes and Failures

The feedback was very positive: students declared that they gained a better understanding the nature of fieldwork. In particular, students mentioned understanding better the tasks, responsibilities and skills of a field researcher, a topic where they had some misconceptions: a common one, for instance, was that field researchers work like secret agents, or investigative journalists. Students declared to prefer the game to readings, because it allowed them *to get in the shoes of real researchers*, to have an idea of the *daily struggles and satisfactions of working in the field*, all while *having fun*. The game resulted particularly appropriate for participants who were getting their first impression about fieldwork and was probably all the better because some students did not read the assigned chapters from the book or read them only superficially. Doctoral students who played the same game the

following week, at the end of a two-day intensive training on the same topic and based on the same book, did not find it as engaging, possibly because they had already processed the information at a deeper critical level.

On the other hand, it was my first time designing a full game and it showed. While most of the individual steps were fun and worked well in themselves, some of them still need improvement and so does the general flow of the game. In addition, the limited duration of the class did not allow sufficient time for developing stories and characters sufficiently. Ideally, participants would have more time to familiarize with their character's background and be able to reflect more on their choices; unfortunately, instead, we had to move at a faster pace through the challenges just to cover them all. Another limitation related to the classroom settings was the number of players. Students found it difficult to play as a group while assuming the role of a single character. However, this drawback had the unintended happy consequence of making participants discuss between themselves what different choices could be made in the same situation, something that I found valuable, as it allowed them to understand the fuzzy, flexible nature of many challenges in the field. Finally, some technical elements can be improved, such as having a functioning the board (I did draw a map illustrating the different chapters of the book but we did not use it) and the points system.

A future version of the game would definitely have to be adjusted to the number of players and time available typical of classroom settings. Additionally, it would be nice to adapt the challenges to include different contexts (open contexts and conflict areas, for instance) and disciplines, in order to address a wider audience.
Overall, the game shows great potential as a didactic tool, mostly for students but also for training researchers. Particularly in pandemic times, the latter can safely,

easily, and cost-effectively practice their skills and be more confident when unrestrained research travels become possible again.

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i A common one is confusing researchers with spies or investigative journalists, another is considering social scientists who do qualitative interviews as less of researchers because they are not engaging with big data or working in laboratories (regarding the comic *Adventures of Alice*, see Del Sordi and Public Cinema 2018).

ii The original exercise belongs to a training developed by myself, Emanuela Dalmasso, Aofei Lv and Marcus Michaelsen at a Seminar on interview methods offered to MA students at the University of Amsterdam in 2016.