

## Let Them Feed Him Biscuits: Doing Fieldwork in Fiji With the Family

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**Abstract:** Embarking on fieldwork in a country and culture that is foreign to oneself will always present challenges alongside the wonderful learning opportunities. Bringing the family along for the ride increases both sides of that equation. This narrative article reflects on the experiences of staying on a remote island in Fiji for social science fieldwork. It looks at the issue of cross-cultural research, and the impacts of the presence of the researcher's family. There are many issues to consider, and changes from what may be a usual research practice, and the presence of the family impacts upon every stage of the research.

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## 1. Setting Things Up

My PhD looks at adaptation to climate change in responding to natural disasters in the South Pacific, contrasting the perspectives of an affected community, the non-government organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs) who provide aid, and governments, in both Fiji and Tonga. My fieldwork during 2012 involved a one month stay in a village on a remote island in Fiji, followed by time in a regional centre and finally the capital, Suva. Organising this from my desk in Australia, was, to say the least, challenging. In today's world of easy e-mail communication, much can be achieved from afar. If my research was being conducted in a Western country, I probably could have organised the whole thing over e-mail with a few phone calls. But not in this part of the world. [1]

In Fiji, an e-mail from someone they don't know may not mean very much, and I received few responses. Referrals from a mutual contact were more successful, but still only to a point. Fijians respond much more to meeting you in person. It is when you meet them you discover that the people of Fiji are very kind and generous, willing and eager to assist. Fijian contacts in Australia, and fellow researchers who had done fieldwork there recommended a scoping trip, and early on it became clear that despite budgetary constraints, they were right. [2]

In Section 1.1, I describe the scoping trip, and in Section 1.2, the remainder of my preparations for the field work, in negotiating access to my chosen village. Section 2 provides details of the location of the fieldwork, and issues relating to doing culturally-appropriate research there. The implications of having my family accompany me on the field work trip, both positive and negative, are described in Section 3. Finally, in Section 4 concludes with lessons learned from the experiences. [3]

### 1.1 Scoping trip

There were three things I wanted to achieve from the scoping trip—identify a village for the fieldwork, identify a list of Government and NGOs/CSOs officials I would need to interview for the research, and apply for a research permit. Even though I was not able to complete all three tasks, I achieved more in a one week scoping trip than I would have in months from Australia. A list of Government and NGOs to interview grew during the week, I managed to confirm the requirements for the research permit application process although not actually submit the application, and to narrow down my village options to two islands. Certainly having two weeks instead of only one would have helped, but I was far more advanced than when I left Australia. People in Fiji knew about the study, were keen for me to do it, and were involved in helping to organise it. I had learned something about the processes I would need to go through both for the research permit, and for permission to stay in a village. [4]

My scoping trip was in early April 2012, with field work planned for late June-early August that same year. So although I had achieved much, I returned from that

initial trip to Fiji with less than two months to finish preparations. Suddenly that seemed like no time at all! [5]

## 1.2 Negotiating village access

The timing of my scoping trip had been in some ways unfortunate. The topic of my research was natural disasters, and I had arrived just days after one. While an interesting time to be there, it did mean that several people I wanted to meet were simply unavailable. That included representatives from the Government department, responsible for disaster response. This was a problem since they were to be pivotal in the process of obtaining permission to stay in a village. There were however other ways as well and I had been offered assistance, through an NGO and the Church, which is very strong throughout Fiji. This created a dilemma: accept the assistance of one of the less formal routes, or wait for the more formal Government help? Fortunately for me, the Government officials were very apologetic about being unable to meet me while I was in Suva, and were very attentive on both phone and e-mail once I returned to Australia. However in true Fiji style, they suggested waiting until two weeks before I left to begin the process of confirming and getting permission for the village stay. This Westerner was more than a little nervous about that plan! Things were made more complicated (from my perspective) because I was taking my family with me on the fieldwork—my husband and two young children. In the words of one researcher with experience in doing just this:

"Anyone who teaches or does research in a remote place abroad knows well the scramble to secure the money, gear, travel documents, inoculations and official permissions that are vital for a productive trip. When scholars choose to bring their families along, the hassles can increase tenfold, but the rewards—both personal and professional—are usually vast" (TROOP, 2011, n.p.). [6]

I was concerned about where we would all stay, since I was purposely looking at villages without tourist infrastructure. To the Fijians this was a minor detail. I was having to start to let go of my Western ways and trust in their relaxed approach. [7]

The need for an interpreter was also on my mind, since my Fijian consisted of little more than a few words, and I didn't have time to go to classes. One of the reasons I had chosen Fiji was that English is an official language there, but I wasn't sure about the fluency on remote islands. Conversational English wouldn't be enough for a research interview. I wasn't sure whether the Government officials assisting with village access were going to organise an interpreter for me or not. Should I accept the help of the NGO or the Church in organising this? But what if the Government arranged something as well? How to navigate this without offending anyone?! Regardless, until a village was chosen, nothing could be arranged. The best I could do was try to find a line between the Fijian relaxed approach and the worrying Westerner, and keep everyone informed. So I contacted the Government agency a little more often than they would have liked, but less often than I wanted to. And I kept the others informed as best I could

—"Thank you for your offer of assistance, I am not sure at the moment if I need it or not, I will let you know when I do." [8]

It was indeed two weeks before we left that the village was confirmed, and the process for gaining permission to stay there began in earnest. The baton was now passed to the divisional (state/regional) level Government officials to finalise arrangements. The two weeks passed very quickly, and we left Australia clear that the Government knew which village we were going to, and when we were coming, but not sure whether or not the village actually knew, let alone where we were staying. Had it been just me on the trip, I would not have been overly concerned, but with children in tow, simply showing up and "improvising on lodging was a nonoption" (STARRS, STARRS, STARRS & HUNTSINGER, 2001, p.79). Ah, but not if your destination is a remote island in Fiji. We made a back up plan of sorts (return to the town two hours away where there is a hotel, assuming we could get back to that town of course), and crossed our fingers. [9]

I had arranged our itinerary with maximising the use of time in mind, and therefore planned to arrive in the regional city closest to the island, and travel to the island the same day. A Fijian colleague in Australia advised me that everything would fall into place once I arrived in that regional city, and to allow a few days there. So we changed our plans to make sure there was time for the last minute arrangements to happen. How right she was—the village found out we were coming only when we arrived in that city, just a couple of days before we began our month long stay with them. The back up plans turned out to be unnecessary, but it was only two days before arriving in the village that we knew that. With my Western ways, I was convinced that the whole thing was going to fall apart. But this is how things are done in Fiji. All the Fijians had told me it would be o.k., and not to worry. I just found it difficult to let go enough to believe them. [10]

## **2. In the Village**

The location for the fieldwork ended up being a small, remote island in the north of Fiji. The island has only two villages, a 20 minute walk apart. There is no tourist infrastructure on the island, and we subsequently discovered that we were the first white family ever to stay there. An honour indeed. We arrived and were greeted by the Chiefly family in whose home we were staying for the next month. Despite finding out only two days before our arrival that we were coming, they opened their home and their hearts to us without any apparent hesitation, for which we will be forever grateful. I can only imagine the response in Australia if someone was told that in two days a family of four were arriving and needing to stay in your home for the next four weeks! [11]

## 2.1 *Talanoa* research

*Talanoa* "literally means talking about nothing in particular, and interacting without a rigid framework" (VAIOLETI, 2006, p.23). It is a culturally appropriate research design in the Pacific, including Fiji, and requires the researchers to establish good relationships and rapport with participants, and to share time, interests and emotions (OTSUKA, 2005). The respectful and trusting relationships generated through the reciprocity of the researcher engaging with the experience rather than just analysing it from afar, means that the participants are much more likely to disclose information. *Talanoa* is the recommended method in Fiji for collecting information from villages, leaders and different government agencies (VAIOLETI, 2006). For a more detailed description of *talanoa* research, see JOHNSTON (2013), 'OTUNUKU (2011), and VAIOLETI (2006). [12]

As a Westerner trying to engage in *talanoa* research, it meant giving more time, and more of myself than I was used to. It was not unusual for interviews, both in the village and the cities, to take more than two hours. Two hours of talking, that is plus the waiting time. "Fiji time" means that an interview scheduled with one person in the morning, may well take place with someone completely different, and in the afternoon. You become very good at waiting around and just taking it all in. The result was that even in the village where I was a maximum 20 minute walk from any interviewee I could do only two interviews on a typical day. [13]

## 2.2 Impact of the hierarchy

In the village, I had two people who were assisting me with organising interviews and translating when required. One was a member of the family we were staying with, the other, the daughter of the Chief, ended up doing most of the interviews with me. Although the daughter of the Chief, she had been brought up in Suva, and still lived there. She is definitely a city girl, and pushed the boundaries of culturally acceptable behaviour in the village, especially being an outspoken female. The combination of her personality and her position in the village hierarchy had interesting repercussions for my research. [14]

My questions, looking at the responses to cyclones, called for people to critically analyse what happens in the village after a disaster. This may have included some criticism of the Chief's carrying out of his roles and responsibilities in the aftermath of a disaster, but I did not hear any of this. While in Australia to criticise someone's father in front of them might be considered rude, it seems that in Fiji it was unacceptably rude. If there were criticisms to be made, I was not going to hear about them while the Chief's daughter was there. [15]

### 2.3 Putting on a happy face

During my scoping trip, I was getting some advice from a local Fijian on what my experience in the village might be like. He said, "the most important things might be what you are not told". I have evidence for having encountered this once, but there were no doubt other instances I was not able to identify. It seemed very important to the villagers to present an image of their village and island as being completely functional and cohesive. That may well be a feature of being a small isolated community as much as a Fijian village, but it was clear to see. This meant that it was difficult to get anyone, even without a translator present, to say anything negative about the villagers or their behaviour. Other foreign researchers in Fiji have also questioned whether the responses they were given were socially desirable rather than truthful (OTSUKA, 2005). Even in asking how the village coped immediately after a cyclone had struck, the constant response was that they just got on with the job of cleaning up. I was expecting that after a cyclone destroyed 50% of all the houses on the island, people would be in such a state of shock and grief that they would need considerable assistance to mobilise such a response. Indeed, that is the picture I was subsequently given by a former villager. [16]

### 2.4 Respecting the language and oral traditions in Fiji

Upon arrival on the island, we participated in the *sevusevu* ceremony, which offers a gift to the Chief (traditionally a gift of *yaqona*, or *kava*, the traditional drink), and formally seeks permission to enter the village. This ceremony is an important part of traditional Fijian culture, and an essential first step. Over the next couple of days, we met and spoke to a number of people in the village, and so the reasons for our staying on the island began to filter through this small community. But before beginning interviews and data collection in earnest, I thought it was important to ensure that I introduced myself and explained the purpose of my research and its confidentiality principles, in person to the entire community. The opportunity for this presented itself at a Church service the first Sunday, which was a joint service of the two denominations on the island, held specially to welcome us. With the help of the head of the family we stayed with (our host father), I wrote a speech that I gave in the local Fijian dialect. The shock, amazement and amusement on the faces of the audience was worth the embarrassment endured during my delivery of that speech. I definitely provided some light entertainment, as did the wonderful ladies closest to me, who every so often, quietly gave me corrections along the way. Regardless of my appalling accent and pronunciation, I am told I was understood, and the speech provided an important entry to my formal research beginning. [17]

After spending a few days getting to know the people and island a little, this speech was intended as a mark of respect for both their local language and the importance of oral traditions in the Fijian culture. I had an information sheet prepared for handing out at the beginning of interviews anyway, but I felt that the speech was a more appropriate way in that community and culture, to formally introduce myself and my family and explain our presence on their island. Just as

bringing my family to stay in their homes, eat their food and attend their school showed my trust in their community, speaking in their Church, in their dialect showed my respect for them and their culture, and my appreciation of their efforts in speaking English to us. [18]

### **3. Having My Family With Me on the Fieldwork**

"Being the primary parent of a young child or children comes into play during every phase of the research, from conceptualising the project, to entering the field and gaining access to participants, to writing up the results" (BROWN & DE CASANOVA, 2009, p.54).

The decision to bring my family with me to Fiji has shaped each stage of my research, though none more so than during our time in the village. In the research literature, certain roles have been identified for children of fieldworkers. Children, just by "being there" help their parents to occupy an understandable role in the social structure of the community; they improve access to information and build rapport between the researcher and the community who are also the informants; and provide the common denominator of "parents" thereby helping to reduce other potential hierarchies in relationships (LEVY, 2009). [19]

#### **3.1 Ice breaker**

Just as at home, everyday life with children is different to life without them. You go to different places, talk to different people and do things at a different pace.

"The researcher's look at society is much closer with family—you cannot escape groceries, hardware stores, schools, clothing shops, movie theatres ... with family are opened companion worlds of information that aren't available, or at least often explored, by men or women when alone, a point whose significance I can't emphasise strongly enough" (STARRS et al., 2001, p.77). [20]

My children were a reason for going places and an excuse to talk with people. They meant that we spent time at the school and with the teachers, and were the reason for walking through the village sometimes looking for them. Walking through the village is always good—makes you visible, allows the opportunity to see and greet people. [21]

#### **3.2 Complete, whole person**

In ethnographical research, the characteristics of the researcher make a difference to the whole experience of researching—what you are allowed to see, what you are told, and what you notice and conclude (TOWNSEND, 1999). Seeing me as a wife and mother and not just a researcher, helped to make me a whole person. This is particularly important in Fijian culture with *talanoa* research where people want to know something about you and learn to trust you before they will open up and speak to you. Having the children around and just doing the everyday things you need to do as a parent meant that people knew something

about me before I'd even spoken to them, and had seen me around. When I first spoke to people, especially the mothers and fathers of young children, we had stories to share of what our children had been doing together. It made me less strange, less of an outsider. I was a fellow school mum. [22]

### **3.3 Evidence of our trust in the community**

Bringing our children to the village to live for the month and attend school there showed that we trusted the community to care for them. This was very evident to them and I believe, greatly appreciated. I think that helped in my interviews since the people had some initial degree of respect and trust in me that I would otherwise have had to earn. [23]

### **3.4 Educational experience for the children**

As a mother, I can see that it was an incredible and educational experience for my children. They were able to attend school and become immersed in a completely different culture, as the first and only foreigners to do so. This placed them in a privileged position, which they don't understand right now, but I hope will come to appreciate as they grow older. The village way of life is so completely different from ours, and living it has taught them a lot. [24]

The freedom and independence that come with living in a small, car free, tight-knit village community gave them the confidence to explore and experience the people and places on their own. It took a week or so (especially for my husband and myself), but once we all felt comfortable, my six and four year old children would leave the house after breakfast, and return by sunset. There would be visits throughout the day, but essentially they were free and welcome to play all day long with their new friends. I remember my four year old son coming back to the house early one afternoon. I was concerned that he had missed out on lunch. "No Mum, I had lunch with my friends up at that house over there". [25]

### **3.5 Better focus on my research**

As a mother, if I had tried to do this fieldtrip without my family, I would have been very distracted and detached the whole time, as a large part of me would have been at home with them. With the security and comfort of having my family with me, I was able to focus on the task and immerse myself in the work. [26]

### **3.6 Excuse for cultural faux pas**

Sometimes the children were just the excuse I needed for an escape route. In a Fijian community, it is considered rude not to accept invitations and be part of community events. This included drinking *kava* (*yaqona*). The cultural significance of this is not lost on me, and I wanted to participate, but it's really not my favourite drink, and I wanted to have a polite one and then depart. Timed to perfection, my daughter became upset with having both of her parents away from



her in the dark, and so I was able to leave the *kava* drinking duties to my wonderful, understanding (and not unwilling!) husband. [27]

### **3.7 Disadvantages**

Having your children in the field does have downsides too: "It is not hard to imagine that children frequently take their parents out of fieldwork contexts, closing as many windows as they can open" (LEVY, 2009, p.318). While it is undoubtedly true that having children to take care of detracts from the time and energy available for the task at hand, and that some potential opportunities are less easily accepted when there are children to consider, I think all of the situations may be viewed as "glass half empty" vs. "glass half full". [28]

#### *3.7.1 Distraction*

Naturally, at times my children were a distraction from my research. For example, small things such as wanting to be at the house when they came home from school for lunch. There were days when someone was sick and I had to step up to the role of mother instead of doing an interview. The time-consuming facts of parenting in this situation were only made possible by having my husband with me, who was able to undertake these duties most of the time. [29]

There were also times when we had school functions to attend instead of doing an interview. But these also provide important cultural information and should therefore be seen as valuable, even if not focussed data collection. [30]

#### *3.7.2 Walking the line between parenting and cultural respect*

My son is aptly described as a fussy eater. So trying new foods was always going to be difficult for him, and we knew that our nightly negotiations at home over eating his dinner would transfer in some form to the village. What we hadn't realised is that the battle would end up being between us and our hosts. In Fiji, it is very insulting to say that you were at someone's house but didn't eat well or there wasn't enough food. After a few evening meals of predictable debate and us trying to keep the heated discussions to a minimum so as not to cause a fuss, our host father approached the topic head on. He said: "Even though we understand that as parents you want him to eat well, you must understand that it is important for us as your hosts that he eats a lot and easily". We had to give in to this and try not to think about it as our son ate chocolate biscuits for breakfast and didn't consume a single vegetable for a whole month. Cultural respect one, parenting nil. But it didn't hurt him, and was very important to them. [31]

#### *3.7.3 Not understanding cultural situations can be more stressful*

On our final night in the village, we were invited to the pastor's house, where the Chief and elders of the village were gathered for a farewell for us. We all sat in a circle talking quietly amongst ourselves. It wasn't really clear to us how long we would be there, or exactly what was going to happen, but after a while our kids

(who were the only children in the room) became restless. They asked us a number of times to be allowed outside, but we were not sure whether that would be rude. Eventually when it became apparent that they had passed their limit, we asked the Pastor, and sure enough, the kids were allowed outside to play with all the other village children. [32]

Then when it got dark, they all went into the church where the pastor's kids were doing a farewell *meke* (dance performance) for our children. The trouble was, it was not made clear to any of us whether the kids and parents (us specifically) were supposed to be together. It seemed that we were each being given special ceremonies, but separately. As it was dark and we were in a less familiar part of the village, our daughter particularly wanted to be with us. We weren't really able to make that happen easily as we felt it would be rude since the village elders were singing for us. It wasn't until she fell over in the darkness and hurt herself that I felt able to leave the gathering to be with her. By then she was visibly upset and scared. Because at no stage did we actually understand what was happening or going to happen, we were unable to explain it to her along the way or make her feel better. The lack of both understanding and control over the situation was very difficult with children. Without children we would have been able to focus more clearly on the honour we were being presented with. [33]

#### *3.7.4 Separation between role as mother and role as researcher*

Bringing my husband and children into the field with me quickly and definitively placed me in the role of "mother". Some of the people I interviewed found it difficult to separate my role as "mother" from that as "researcher/student", as demonstrated by the numerous times I was asked where they were and why I hadn't brought them along with me to do the interview (outside the village). For some people, and in my examples they were all men, knowing that I was part of a family was not enough—they wanted to meet them too. I interpreted this as being part of the Fijian culture of wanting to know me as a whole person. It extends to other cultures too though, and was experienced by a female researcher in Ecuador, who found that having her child with her on the fieldtrip but not physically present for most research based interactions made her motherhood more symbolic or abstract (BROWN & DE CASANOVA, 2009). [34]

#### *3.7.5 Communication breakdowns*

One day, a group of us planned to go out on the boat to the main island for the day. While we were getting ready to board, it was low tide, so the boat was about 100m from shore. Most people going were standing around under a tree at the shoreline, waiting to board. My family was there as well, while I went inside the house to get our bag packed for the day. When I came out again, my son was already on the boat, and my husband was walking out with our daughter. Our host mother said to me that my kids were going to the neighbouring village, to collect some others who were also going to the main island with us. My husband put our daughter on the boat, and then started heading back to shore to help me with our bags. Our kids were then both on the boat with two teenage boys (13

and 15 years old) from the family we were staying with (but who we had only met a couple of days earlier as they were away at boarding school). [35]

Not having been there when the conversations about this short trip took place, I assumed my husband was aware what was happening. Actually though, no one had told him, as their discussions about it were in Fijian. The other adults assumed he understood and was happy with it. Besides, children going on a boat is not a big deal for people who live with this form of transport. Our kids however were not used to it, and my son especially didn't understand the importance of, for example, not getting up and walking around the small boat while it was moving. As we all figured out the communication breakdown, we watched the boat with our two children on it, disappearing around the bend. [36]

Of course, given that my husband, who had put them on the boat, didn't know that it was about to leave, neither did our children. So they had no idea what was happening and why we weren't with them. There was nothing we could do except wait. It would take them only about 15 minutes to get there, pick up the others and return. It was a very long 15 minutes. [37]

The teenagers in charge of the boat were perfectly capable, and our children were safe the whole time. The adults around us knew this, and so it was understandable that they thought it would be fun for our kids to go on their own. For us though, all the other factors loomed large. We were far away from home, using an unfamiliar form of transport, there were no lifejackets, and we knew that our children didn't know what was going on and would be too scared to ask. An unremarkable event turned into a scarring one, because of a simple communication breakdown—a few seconds of not thinking about the language barrier. [38]

### *3.7.6 After my family had gone home*

Leaving the village also meant leaving my family for the last two weeks of my trip. They were returning home again. The new school term was starting, and my husband needed to return to work at university where a new semester of teaching began in a couple of days. I fully expected that the final two weeks of my trip, in Suva, would consist of me trying to stay as busy as I could to distract myself from missing my family. Even after five weeks in Fiji, I had managed to underestimate their kindness and generosity of spirit once again. [39]

While the two weeks were very busy for me with trying to finish my data collection, I needn't have worried that the evenings and weekends would be spent feeling lonely, and missing my family. Instead, I spent much of those times with the Suva part of my new family. Just as I started longing for the fabulous food on the island in place of microwave meals in my hotel, I found myself at family gatherings and being given precious leftovers of the wonderful home cooked Fijian food. The Suva branch of the family were just as generous and friendly as we had experienced on the island, and I remain very grateful for it. [40]

#### 4. Lessons Learned

Many of the incidents referred to above did not happen while I was trying to do an interview, or conduct a focus group. You could say that therefore they didn't affect my research. However, in this kind of fieldwork, it seems that everything impacts the research. These incidents changed my perceptions of the people and places we were in, and similarly, would have changed the villagers' perceptions of me. Some of those changes were undoubtedly positive, as they helped to make me a whole person, not a strange researcher. Other changes were probably not so positive. The incident on the boat trip must have come across as though we did not trust the two boys, which may have been offensive or rude. Trusting them was not the point, but explaining the subtle differences was difficult with the language barrier. [41]

Other researchers have recommended taking your family and children with you on fieldwork trips: "... if you're married and/or have children, do try to bring them along. Again, as a family, you may enter the culture more completely" (VEECK, 2001, p.39). [42]

I would definitely take my children with me again on a research field trip. It was an invaluable experience for them and us, to be immersed in a foreign culture and place, and become part of another family. [43]

The fact that Fijians are relaxed about things and so friendly and welcoming makes it a wonderful place to do fieldwork. Even in the capital, where *kai valagis* (foreigners) are a common sight, people in the street will say *bula* (hello) to you and go out of their way to walk you to your destination sharing their umbrella, when it is raining. My family and I had an amazing time, and it was a privilege to be able to experience it. Relaxing into it yourself can be difficult, but well worth it. It will take longer than you expect, and will not be until the last minute, but things will get done—just turn up and ask. [44]

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