Article

Not Alone in the Field: Distance Collaboration via the Internet in a Focused Ethnography

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Abstract

Ethnography as method remains orthodox in its application. It is largely replicated through the lone field ethnographer model. In challenging this fieldwork model, the authors describe distance collaboration via the Internet linking two researchers across space and time in the fieldwork process: one in the field, the other home based. Using a reflexive, retrospective analysis of e-mail correspondence generated during the fieldwork experience, they explicate key factors in their successful collaborative effort. In addition, interchanges conducive to "thickening" the ethnographic inquiry are highlighted. The collaborative process, facilitated through the Internet, lent psychological strength to the field researcher and added to research quality, timeliness, and trustworthiness in this focused ethnography. Cyber-technology invites exploration of new approaches and resultant challenges in conducting ethnographic fieldwork.

Keywords: ethnography, fieldwork, process, distance collaboration, Internet, co-construction, audience, gambling

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Introduction

The methods and processes by which ethnography and collaborative ethnography are constructed have been underresearched and underrepresented in the anthropological literature (Geertz, 2004; Gottlieb, 1995; Kuper, 1996; Marcus, 2001; Salzman, 1994). Ethnography as a product of a solo, centralized, and monologic narration with a single voice representative of objective reality was challenged with the postmodern interpretive turn that began in late 1960s and gathered momentum into the 1990s (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Lassiter, 2005; Salzman, 2002). The view shifted from ethnography as an objective representation of a culture produced by a neutral observer to an understanding of anthropological knowledge as an interpretive enterprise constructed out of the negotiated meaning perspectives of multiple viewpoints with multiple voices, whether implicitly or explicitly stated (Geertz, 1973; Lassiter, 2005; Marcus & Fischer, 1986).

Recent discussion on collaborative ethnography has focused largely on the product of ethnography arising from the partnership between the ethnographer and participants in the field (Lassiter, 2005). Less has been detailed on the professional relationship between research colleagues in ethnography and how collaboration was deliberately fashioned and developed (see Gottlieb, 1995). A few descriptive accounts have addressed the strains and stresses of collaborative fieldwork (Gudeman & Rivera, 1995; Lapovsky Kennedy, 1995; Theophano & Curtis, 1996), but explication of the value added by collegial collaboration as well as the steps and approaches that contribute to its success have been only thinly described in the literature. Writing about "doing ethnography" and collaboration calls for reflexivity in examining how we go about the ethnographic process. A self-conscious study of ethnographic methods has been singled out as a focus much needed for advancement of the field (Geertz, 2004; Lapovsky Kennedy, 1995; Marcus, 2001).

The Internet's coming of age is rapidly changing the way qualitative research is being conducted. Examples highlighting the use of e-mail to facilitate data collection and analysis have been reported in the literature (e.g., Bunting, Russell, & Gregory, 1998; Liehr et al., 2004). Ethnographic studies have also focused on the Internet as a repository or "field" for online qualitative data (Lysloff, 2003; Sade-Beck, 2004; Wittel, 2000). However, the use of Internet as a communication tool to expedite ethnographic fieldwork has not been featured prominently in the literature.

Technological advances open up new ways of designing and approaching research. They summon new modes of human interaction that make possible development of new research approaches. Harnessing the power of technology such as the Internet requires not only technological know-how. It also entails changing the way researchers conceive of partnerships and teamwork to capitalize on technological capacity and the possibility of advancing the conduct of qualitative research.

In this paper we describe a collaborative fieldwork process with a reliance on the Internet and cybertechnology between two researchers, one in the field and the other home based, that enhanced the fieldwork stage of a focused ethnography on problem gambling in Hong Kong. We explicate the key elements of this long-distance collaboration with the intent that our account will aid other ethnographers in meeting the challenges of fieldwork, especially focused ethnographic fieldwork of short, intense duration.

Contextual background to the
Hong Kong focused ethnography

The expansion of legalized gambling worldwide has thrust problem gambling into the foreground of addictions research. The popularity of gambling among Chinese is a topic of fascination for scholars and researchers (Lam, 2007; Papineau, 2005; Raylu & Oei, 2004). Of concern also is the reported higher-than-average prevalence of problem and pathological gambling among Asians and Southeast Asians in Western countries (Blaszczynski, Huynh, Dumalo, & Farrell, 1998; Chinese Family Service Centre of Greater Montreal, 1997; Petry, Armentano, Kuoch, Norinth, & Smith, 2003). However, the factors underlying these associations are less clear.

The principal researcher lived her formative years in Hong Kong and received her higher education in the United States and Canada, where she resided as an immigrant citizen. Motivated by curiosity and a desire to understand gambling and Chinese culture, she decided to marshal her Chinese cultural and linguistic knowledge advantageously to bear on the exploration of this phenomenon in a focused ethnography. The purpose was to explore the gamblers' sociocultural lifeworld and experiences of problem gambling at a mutual help recovery center in Hong Kong.

The door for this study opened as a result of an encounter with the founder and program facilitator of a gamblers' recovery mutual help organization during an international conference on problem gambling in Hong Kong in 2005. Intrigued by her conversations with Mr. Zee (pseudonym), a recovered pathological gambler of some 20 years, and a visit to the gamblers' recovery group where he serves, the principal researcher noted cultural values, concepts, and attitudes related to gambling development and recovery that invited exploration. This site was deemed suitable for a focused ethnography in terms of its size, degree of social complexity, and potential richness of data that could be accommodated in a study of short duration. The organization was independent of government mandate and funding at the time and hence less influenced by Western "professional" and "organizational" knowledge and values, thus allowing the observation of a local and unique variety of a recovery program.

Subsequently, the principal researcher followed up with a proposal for a 3-week ethnographic study at this center for gamblers' recovery. The response from the center and Mr. Zee was enthusiastic and supportive. Nine months later, fieldwork for the focused ethnography ensued, after approval had been obtained from the Human Subjects Research Ethics Committee at the University of Lethbridge.

The focused ethnography was guided by the research question, What Chinese values, beliefs and practices inform the development of and recovery from problem gambling among members of this recovery center? Although the site was the recovery center itself, observations and field notes also included the principal researcher's encounters in the field in larger Hong Kong and Macao during a 3-week period in August 2006. For the first 2 weeks, the principal researcher acted as participant-observer in the daily activities of the center and attended the sessions and evening groups involving the program facilitator, Mr. Zee. She accompanied him to restaurants, the center's anniversary banquet, other gambling recovery programs, and the Macao casinos. Mr. Zee also arranged interviews with individual participants and individual and group sessions for her observation. These field observations and encounters were captured in ongoing field notes, some audiotapes, and digital photographs. The third week was used mainly for conducting follow-up interviews and two focus groups to complete the study.

Challenges of fieldwork in focused ethnography

Beyond the orchestration of the study, the challenges of fieldwork are many: geographic isolation and dislocation; language barriers; social and intellectual loneliness; disappointments and setbacks; and unfamiliarity of land and culture, posing unanticipated risks (see Lareau & Shultz, 1996; Mead, 1995; Obeyesekere, 1990; Salzman, 1994). Because fieldwork is essentially unbounded and all-encompassing, the abundance of data has the potential to create sensory, emotional, and analytical overload and exhaustion. However, these challenges were often relegated to the background, and ethnographers traditionally met fieldwork challenges with stoicism (Borofsky, 1994). Focused ethnography poses additional pressures by virtue of its circumscribed focus, compressed duration for data gathering, and demands for prompt, continual data analysis to direct the ethnographic inquiry (Knoblauch, 2005). Ethnographers typically employ methods that are field dependent and follow the leads of participants, emerging themes, researchers' hunches, field dynamics, and serendipity. This iterative process of data gathering and analysis unfolds within an intensive time frame in focused ethnographic fieldwork. Consequently, the more efficiently, clearly, and surely one makes sense of accumulating data, the better the field researcher can focus time in pursuit of thematic patterns in the fast-paced, intensive landscape of fieldwork.

Furthermore, fieldwork can fully immerse the researcher in an embodied experiential realm that is replete with sensual, affective, biographical, and cultural associations. Thus, the "vulnerable observer" (Behar, 1996) does not approach the field dispassionately; rather, the ethnographer is poised to enter deeply into a world she seeks to understand anew, open to the joy, excitement, nostalgia, and mourning for a vanishing era of changes in culture, time, and place. Field notes interweave personal biography and emotions that arise from observations and interactions in the field. Thus, the subjective and objective in ethnography blend inextricably, with affect informing observations, and associations priming analysis:

> I have nearly forgotten the configuration of various Chinese characters, the detailed strokes and lines. I find them beautiful and wonderfully evocative. Arriving at the airport, I traced these characters with my fingers: "Hoi Gwan" meaning customs. I love the symmetry of the character "Gwan"—the two panels of a double door, a gateway. As I traced these characters with my fingers, I uncannily became reconnected kinesthetically to myself as a child and the calligraphy I used to practise. My Chinese identity was imprinted through these characters, kinesthetically and visually through repetition; cultural values and observations imparted by conversations heard and overhead with servants and family . . . I appreciate these

complex original Han characters as I savour their richness and layers of meaning graphically and semantically . . . It's like I am breathing in their intergenerational layers, the schemata of time unearthing archeological consciousness. (field notes)

The senses were alert and the emotions engaged, and associations abounded. For the principal ethnographer to continuously take in the affective, sensory, and cognitive dimensions of her field experience, she realized her need to "declutter my mental and emotional system" (field notes) for each new day. This involved processing her experience in writing without censorship, and making free flowing associations based on what was encountered in the field. Thus, the importance of a collaborator or assistant for research and moral support was apparent. The recruitment of a distance collaborator for the fieldwork was necessitated when the research assistant accompanying the principal research left the field early as a result of unanticipated circumstances.

Researchers' backgrounds

The two collaborating researchers during the fieldwork phase of this focused ethnography both had extensive experience in qualitative research, including a solid grounding in ethnography. They were familiar with the protocols and ethics of conducting research in a Canadian context and in the field, hence a shared procedural and ethical framework. They were joined by a strong valuing of partnerships in research.

Between them, the researchers had many years of professional experience in the helping professions, the principal researcher as a marriage and family therapist, and the co-researcher as a registered nurse. Both researchers had experience of living cross-culturally. As a result, they were attuned to the relativities of cultural constructs and were sensitive to and appreciative of cultural nuances and manifestations. On the other hand, the researchers' academic preparation highlighted some differences. The principal researcher adopts a cross-cultural lens and a sensitivity to psychosocial processes of thoughts, values, beliefs, emotions, and communication operative in family systems and socioecological dynamics. The co-researcher has had a wealth of experience in applied research in institutions, viewed through a critical theoretical lens that is sensitive to gender, power relations, practice, and policy applications.

Method

In this section we describe the recruitment and communication that set the stage for the distance collaboration and how the main elements of the collaborative process were identified and charted.

Structuring the collaborative relationship

Collaborating in this fieldwork was a performance involving two actors across time and geographical distance, the barriers of which were dissolved by Internet technology. Structuring the collaborative relationship in ethnography establishes an understanding of mutual expectations, and respective roles and responsibilities. When the field researcher decided to recruit the co-researcher stationed in Canada, in the e-mail, she described the purpose and objectives of the project and set out her expectations consisting of the following points:

1. *Confidentiality*. Confidentiality was important both for the protection of the participants as well as for guarding the field ethnographer's narrative freedom. This assurance allowed the principal researcher to engage in candid field reflections,

associations, and analysis without censor. The collaborator agreed to the secure storage of the data until its destruction upon project completion. Only pseudonyms were used for participants.

2. *Ethics approval*. The principal researcher informed the sponsoring academic institution of the addition of the co-researcher on the project. The ethics approval and the participants' recruitment documents were amended to reflect his status and inclusion.

3. *Time frame*. The collaborators agreed to work together for the 3-week duration of the fieldwork and the tasks and activities that were to transpire within this time period.

4. *Timeliness of response*. Both collaborators committed to a 24-hour turnaround time in responding to field notes and each other's comments. There was a 13-hour time difference between the two researchers, so their cycle of waking and sleeping was complementary, reversed but well synchronized. Timeliness of response and communication was crucial in meeting the timelines of activities and meetings set up in the field. The field ethnographer could reliably anticipate a response to her narrative when she woke up the next morning.

5. *Tasks and expectations*. The field researcher conveyed an approximation of the pages of readings of field narratives that would be sent each day, and of her expectations of input and analyses from the collaborator. These expectations were mutually agreed on.

6. *Collaborative scholarship*. The possibilities of future collaborative scholarship and publications were posed:

I will send you my field notes/ethnographic accounts and interview notes as I go. Please read them and note patterns and highlights. Do feel free to raise any questions and thoughts that arise as you read these notes. With your input, we will be doing a progressive analysis of the ethnographic data. I will also send you photographs to give you a more sensory feel of the field. . . . In the next three weeks, I likely will be sending you about 10 pages of field notes a day, maybe less, maybe more. (recruitment e-mail from principal researcher)

Giving thought to structure the collaborative relationship was not a step to be taken for granted. This mutual understanding of expectations and anticipations paved the way for a smooth, cooperative working relationship. The e-mail correspondence also provided a written record for future reference.

Fieldwork communication

In this 21st-century fieldwork collaboration, the communication tools included the use of e-mail and Internet phone to transmit texts, digital photographs, and voice during the 3-week fieldwork phase of the ethnography. These modes of communication were low-cost for high-volume transmittal of information. There were daily e-mail exchanges (total of 200 single-spaced pages), including attachments of field note narratives, discussions, and comments, 23 digital photographs, and two 30-minute phone calls.

Charting the collaborative process

Qualitative content analysis of e-mail and the researchers' reflective process notes were used to extract the most salient aspects of the collaborative process. After the principal researcher returned to her home university, the two researchers met for three 2-hour sessions and reflected on their collaborative experience in writing, resulting in two sets of process notes, one for each researcher. Their written process reflections were prompted by a review of their e-mail exchanges during the fieldwork period. Factors found to be important to the collaboration and to the co-constructing process are described in the next section.

The co-constructing process

Co-construction during the fieldwork phase of ethnography refers to the ways in which the ethnographic data collection, analysis, and interpretation accumulated in intensity and became increasingly complex. An interconnected mesh of sense and meaning was formed through the interchange between the two researchers. After giving consideration to how the recruitment of an audience supports this co-construction process, the researchers discuss the various types of questioning and responses that led to the "thickening" of the ethnographic weave.

Creating an audience

The audience plays a central role in narratives, performances, and social construction (Lee, 2002; Myerhoff, 1982; Ong, 1982/2002; White, 1995). Whether one or many, interactive or seemingly passive as witnesses, the audience provides a context and reception to the presentation that influences the energy and development of the narrative. In more explicit ways in oral societies, where a live audience interacts with the narrator, and in implicit ways in textual societies, where the audience is implied and delayed, the narrator-audience relationship constitutes the frame and dialogue in which the narrative unfolds (Ong, 1982/2002). The sense of one's audience and the assumption of what the audience brings shapes the details selected, the degree of explanation provided, or what is left unsaid and underexplained. Furthermore, an audience lends validity and reality to the narrative through bearing witness and acknowledgement of the presentation, thus stabilizing it as a co-constructed representation of reality.

Written ethnography has historically been a lone enterprise. Writer and reader are alone in their writing and reading acts, separated by geography and time. The writer of ethnographic texts may agonize over the uncertainties and anxieties of a nebulous audience who is invisible, delayed, distant, and diverse.

In this fieldwork, however, the provisions of cybertechnology made possible a tangible audience in the person of the co-researcher, who was immediate and responsive. The sense of a live, sympathetic, interested audience vivified and energized the field researcher's description of stories and experiences in the field. Monologue yielded to dialogue, adding validation, queries, and interest. The co-researcher signaled his presence through the conveyance of interest, which urged the field ethnographer onward:

> Your field notes are "quality" products. Just the right detail and insights and observations . . . I look forward to the next installment! (e-mail from co-researcher)

> Your writing is superb: detailed, descriptive, and insightful. (e-mail from co-researcher).

> As I mentioned previously, your field notes narratives are *excellent* and will serve as good data. I also thought your "interpretation" sections were good; likely you will want to continue making them at the end of your interviews. Several of my observations parallel your thoughts and interim conclusions. (e-mail from co-researcher)

His observations assured the field researcher that her field notes did "speak" and capture the reader's interest. She, in turn, acknowledged the stabilizing and guiding effect of this presence in the ongoing construction of the ethnography:

> Thank you for your insightful comments. They have made clear some themes and directions for further inquiry already. (e-mail from principal researcher)

> The partnership with you is a true asset for me. I feel supported, which relaxes me and helps me work optimally. I can't imagine gathering all these data and keeping everything inside myself and writing to myself. I hope you too will keep track of your reactions to this process. (e-mail from principal researcher)

The audience became increasingly engaged in the "presentation" over time and began to offer comments, suggestions, and queries.

> At first, I was not certain of what would be expected of me. I was interested and excited to be a part of the project. Hong Kong is 13 hours ahead of Lethbridge and so I would arrive at my office and my computer with eager anticipation—to see what had arrived overnight. I was greeted with your e-mails—which I opened and read with great interest. At first, I was somewhat "shy" in encountering the data as I felt it was not mine and I did not feel legitimate in relation to the data. I received the data, but did not generate it. But with each e-mail message, I began to become familiar with the field context and more fully engaged with the project. Over time, I as the "distance far" researcher became "experience near" and the geographical and temporal differences were transcended. (co-researcher's process notes)

The accessibility of the multiple forms of electronic media that relay close-to-instantaneous, or "real-time," interaction has ramifications for the fieldwork of ethnography that have yet to be explored in depth. An Internet culture can bridge the self-conscious reflexivity of a textually acculturated person given to private reflection by allowing this reflexive writer to interact with a distant partner as audience in a present context, thereby extending his or her horizon of awareness of what is "out there." Thus, through Internet technology collaboration in fieldwork and co-construction of narratives were reinvented between the fieldworker as "actor" and the co-researcher in the role of a prompt and responsive "audience." Moreover, this sense of audience kept the ethnographer self-conscious of the emic and etic perspectives in her reporting as she wrote with the tacit knowledge of the culture as an insider, coupled with the curiosity and freshness of an outsider to convey impressions and descriptions to someone less familiar with the intricacies and nuances of Chinese culture.

Internet technology: Linking the field researcher and the home-based researcher

While the field ethnographer was engaged in the "hurly burly" of fieldwork encompassing travels, negotiations, encounters, following-up on leads, problem solving, interviews, and participant-observations, the home-based collaborator gained a window into the field primarily

through the principal ethnographer's field notes and what was uploaded onto his computer screen. The home-based collaborator reported that although the ethnographic field notes were richly described, they were nevertheless two dimensional. His engagement with the field "quickened" with the importation of digital photographs. One would imagine that had both the sights and sounds of the field been uploaded earlier, through electronic pictures and audio files sent to the collaborator, the multichannel, multisensory input would have markedly enlivened his engagement with the field virtually:

> Receiving the photographs repositioned my stance in relation to the project and my relationship with the data. I encountered the textual accounts—although rich in description—on my computer screen. I imagined the context, but it was the digital photographs that brought the field "to life." Literally, the field changed from black and white to the coloured lushness of Hong Kong. The pictures "quickened" the field and brought to life the key participants, the recovery centre, the podium from which one of the key participants spoke and so forth. Receiving the digital pictures earlier in the project would have opened up the "ethnographic space" to me and fostered engagement sooner. I would have entered the field in a much more meaningful way, i.e., the pictures offered 3-dimensional portraits. (co-researcher's process notes)

Today's electronic resources have made possible the presence of the home-based researcher in the field. The field was virtually imported into his office. Multichannel, mixed media conveyance of the field experience through digital photography and video and audio recordings (not uploaded for this collaboration), and live conversations between the collaborators through Internet phone lines were all important in forging the linkage between the collaborators. Although e-mail was used for textual exchange, the phone was more effective for social and emotional connection through the immediacy of voice and tone, laughter, and pauses. Text connection allowed for deliberation and expansiveness of reflection, analysis, and elaboration. A facility with different modes of electronic technology and an awareness of their suitability for different purposes is an indispensable skill in long-distance collaboration.

In contrast to the field ethnographer's unbounded encounters in the field, the collaborator's more bounded encounter with the data in a milieu of quiet and calm afforded him the leisure for reflection and analysis that were not the prerogative of the field researcher caught up in the heat of action. From this distance position, the home ethnographer was able to organize and "sift through" the principal researcher's field notes and narratives, review e-mail conversations, note themes, and contribute to the drawing up of focus group questions for the perusal of the field ethnographer:

> It's 10:30 a.m. here and likely the middle of the night in Hong Kong. I had the opportunity to print off the field notes and ethnographic narrative (I reformatted them to create a coding space [right margins = 3.0] and I numbered the lines of text for easy reference. Because I was at a distance from the field, and because my "field" consisted of *your* field notes, I had much more time to reflect on the data. As the experience-near ethnographer, you were "caught up" in the realities of managing the day-to-day field. Thus, I suggest that I had more reflection time and opportunities to engage the data. (e-mail from co-researcher)

The collaboration between the action-oriented field researcher and the home-based researcher with more access to time and equipment served the project well. He was on hand as new and immediate tasks arose from the fieldwork, such as the following request in the second week:

In the last week, I'd like to do one or two focus groups to check out various hypotheses. I don't have a printer, so it's harder for me to go back to all our e-mails and notes to gather the main themes. Would you be able to start setting up a list of questions and areas to pursue in the focus groups? (e-mail from principal researcher in second week)

After reviewing the cumulative field notes and his own comments, the home-based researcher systematically drew up two sets of focus group questions for gamblers and their family members, respectively, accompanied by specific probes, for the timely perusal of the field ethnographer. The well-formulated questions brought order to the themes and hypotheses generated from the fieldwork and were cross-checked by both researchers. The interplay of immersion and sitting back, action and reflection expedited the co-construction process in significant and meaningful ways in meeting the various milestones in this study.

The co-researcher was sensitive to his secondary encounter with the data as opposed to the principal researcher's full immersion in the field and its changing dynamics. Therefore, while proposing focus group questions, the co-researcher recognized that the primary researcher ultimately had the prerogative to decide what questions would be most important and relevant based on her first-hand encounter with the field and its participants:

I drafted some focus group questions for your consideration. As I mentioned to you previously, you are "there" and so you have the insight of "theoretical sensitivity." These questions will likely serve as a point of departure and/or assist you in the development of other questions. So, please edit/change/add to or eliminate as you see fit. (e-mail from co-researcher)

Given this freedom, the principal researcher was able to let the focus group questions guide her but not be constrained by them. If both researchers were in the field, a differently negotiated way of co-construction would likely be needed (e.g., Gudeman & Rivera, 1995; Theophano & Curtis, 1996).

Thickening

According to Geertz (1973), "ethnography is thick description" (p. 12). It is less a panoply of facts than it is the weaving of a tapestry of interrelationships and meanings. In this study the field researcher followed the threads suggested by vignettes of encounters, a cultural saying, a concept or an unfamiliar way of perception. Included in the ethnography were descriptions of how people interact revealing their roles and social status, the use and symbolic meaning of objects; the social function of an activity, an image, and a slogan in posters; and the use of private and public space. These were thickly described in the field notes over 3 weeks. The field researcher also recorded her reflections on each set of her field notes. Slowly, the relationships among the various elements started to make sense; phrases and concepts delineated in different contexts began to intersect. "Thick descriptions" went beneath the rendering of the surface and physicality of objects and events. They situated objects and events in a web of interconnections with their contrasts and convergences, cross-referencing one another to fill out an expanding "culturescape" (Geertz, 1973, p. 21) of possible meanings. Over time the texture of these descriptions became multilayered, the patterns clearer and more defined. Advances in the ethnography became evident when the path of observations and inquiry in the jungle of the field are thrown into bold relief. Key concepts slowly crystallized.

With the help of the home-based co-researcher, the principal researcher "thickened" her ethnographic work in terms of her conceptualization, progressive analysis, and writing of the ethnographic narrative, which aided her pursuit of data in the field. Both researchers encountered the data tentatively with openness and respect, thus allowing the data to gather empirical weight over time. Always staying close to the ethnographic narratives of the principal researcher, referring to and quoting them specifically, the co-researcher added his observations, comments, and questions to the field notes. Posing questions with specific references to the field notes, the co-researcher kept to the weave of the original fabric. Several kinds of questioning and commenting served to thicken the ethnographic enterprise.

Musing, wondering, querying, reflecting

The following is an excerpt of field notes from the principal researcher:

> When Mr. Zee met me, he immediately commented on how I looked more energetic than when he saw me back in November. He observed that I was rather tired when we met last year. I replied that could be because of my teaching and my move. This reminds me of my mother who used to do a reading of me by the way my voice sounded, or my complexion. It is in fact a very common Chinese custom when people size up each other's Chi and colour and then comment on it as if they were each other's mirror . . . I noticed that Mr. Zee looked tired, and a bit sallow, compared to how he appeared last time, but I didn't want to bring this up right away . . . It was only after lunch that I observed to him that it seemed customary for Chinese to observe people's "energy and spirit" and asked if he noticed changes in his gamblers. His reply was "Wait til you see Jong tomorrow!" . . . I took this opportunity while we were on the topic of "Chi and colour" to reflect that he seemed more tired than last we met. Then he disclosed to me that he had actually suffered a severe health setback recently and was hospitalized for 10 days. (field notes)

To this, the home-based researcher wrote,

> This idea of "reading others' Chi" or state really is fascinating. Do you think it enters into the experience of problem gamblers in any way? Can others read their Chi and then press them for answers to what is going on with them? Is such reading occurring in the counseling sessions? . . . So—there may be something to this "energy and spirit" among the gamblers and perhaps, in the course of their treatment. Yes? No? I wonder what "place" energy and spirit occupy in the path to healing? (e-mail from co-researcher)

Suggesting the extension of presenting observations
and avenues for exploration

The field researcher wrote,

> There are more roles in the old society, not leveled by equality as in our Western contemporary one. The differentiation of roles makes life simpler. We each have a part to play. Is society all about playing roles? Emperors, courtiers, servants, soldiers? Male and female? What happens when the roles become too restrictive? Is there room for permutations and switching? A lot of energy is stored in forbidden roles. It is dangerous to let those roles loose, but a thrill as well. What kind of roles do gamblers assume when they are at the casino? Do they try on a make-belief role,

an alternative and outlet to a confined society? Do we need to break out of roles once in a while? How do we find an alternate space for other manifestations? (field notes)

The co-researcher responded,

I was most interested in your observations about *roles* and how this is evident and practised more so in Chinese culture than in contemporary Western cultures, i.e., everyone has a sense of their place. You said, "There is a lot of energy stored in forbidden roles" . . . What kind of roles do gamblers assume (if at all) when they are at the casino? This may be worthwhile exploring with the participants. (e-mail from co-researcher)

Proposing associations and linkages of a concept that came up
in different contexts in the field notes

The field researcher wrote,

I arrived in Hong Kong near midnight. I noticed big glossy neon-lit billboards at the airport and how they capitalize on empty space to get attention, offering a refreshing outlook (see photos). "Space" is what Hong Kong people covet in their busy, congested, socially-dense environment. "Negative space." I wonder how we go about creating "negative space" psychologically? How do we clean out the clutter? These picture billboards are enormously evocative: a small plant sprouting from an acorn; the word forest" written in the lower corner. Immense space in between. Possiblity. Potential. Not yet. The viewer is drawn into the open space. (field notes)

The co-researcher wrote in response,

I was fascinated by your "negative space" comments in relation to the bill boards in Hong Kong. AND, I began to wonder whether "negative space" can be incorporated into the Chinese counseling interventions. You wrote: "I wonder how we go about creating "negative space" psychologically? How do we clean out the clutter?" Later on in your field notes, you wrote, "So much of Chinese cultural knowledge is embedded in a message. Make it a riddle to pique your curiosity. Use some dissonance to grab attention…" Is this how negative space, psychologically speaking, is created? Would this be something to discuss with Mr. Zee and/or the participants? Is this "technique" used in the counseling sessions? (e-mail from co-researcher)

Linking field notes observations to theory and existing literature

At first, I thought the cross-dressing life of X was not related to problem gambling, however, as I read through the narratives, I began to appreciate the possibility of convergence. Eric Cassell [The Nature of Suffering and the Goals of Medicine] talks about *personhood* and what constitutes a person. One of the dimensions of being a person is "the secret life." All of us have a secret life or things in our lives that are deeply personal and private…. Is problem gambling a kind of "secret life?" (e-mail from co-researcher).

The researchers' differences in cultural positioning and theoretical lens introduced sometimes diverging lines of inquiry. While the principal researcher with her family therapy background

focused on the systemic analysis of family communication and dynamics, the co-researcher favored using critical and feminist theory in his research:

> Has anyone done a study on the wives of problem gamblers? Perhaps this has already been done; but if not—it would be HUGE to conduct a qualitative study on the wives—through a feminist lens—and discover what their experiences have been. Thoughts?

What the principal researcher, being more familiar with the Chinese culture, took for granted the Western collaborator found remarkable:

> This historical context is valuable to know—and that children's gambling was a cultural norm. Is game playing (tossing coins, etc.) different from gambling? Clearly, gaming/gambling were important and accepted cultural activities. Is this not a clear contrast with North American (Canadian?) problem gamblers? . . . "Gambling opened your heart." This is an *amazing* statement. It speaks volumes about how gambling may be understood and experienced within Chinese culture— that "It was fun and enjoyable" as a social activity. (e-mail from co-researcher)

Summary of e-mail conversation

In sum, the conversation by e-mail between the two researchers served to confirm and extend the field researcher's emerging constructions of the field. This immediate back-and-forth exchange opened up possible new avenues for exploration. The ongoing processing through description, free association, reflection and dialogue helped to clear a space for the field researcher to encounter new experiences on a daily basis.

> I so look forward to getting your analyses and notes. They bring further clarity and confirmation to my own emerging analysis. I am beginning to have a map or model of what's going on with gamblers at this site, the social context, how Mr. Zee works, his modus operandi, the gamblers' issues, and what the gaps are in my understanding.

> It's like trying to crack the "Da Vinci code." The code is becoming clearer though not yet complete. I am totally engaged and immersed in the project. I haven't reached saturation by any means. (e-mail from principal researcher)

The co-researcher was careful not to impose premature conclusions or theories on the data. As the co-researcher linked his points to the principal researcher's field notes, the principal researcher noted new patterns and configurations through a new thread color, and by joining existing threads together into more complex patterns. Thus, the "thickening" of the fieldwork and the emerging ethnography took place through co-construction.

Discussion

In the existing literature on fieldwork collaboration (whether between spouses or colleagues or with participants), the process underlying such collaboration has seldom been systematically described and analyzed (Gottlieb, 1995; Gudeman & Rivera, 1995; Marcus, 2001). Accounts in the literature speak to field collaborations that simply "happened" rather than ones that were "planned" (e.g., Gottlieb, 1995; Gudeman & Rivera, 1995; Theophano & Curtis, 1996). Was the

positive outcome of our fieldwork collaboration serendipitous, or did it benefit from deliberation and prior clear agreement and structuring? In this paper we have presented an explicit account of the collaboration process between two researchers, one situated in the field and the other home-based, made possible through cybertechnology and the Internet that enhanced the fieldwork in a focused ethnography. The fieldwork collaboration was intentionally structured, and the key elements and process that contributed to its success were delineated by content analysis of e-mail and field notes and with the researchers' retrospective reflection and analysis of the process of what transpired.

Clarity of roles was important. The home-based researcher recognized his position as a co-researcher whose role in this study was secondary in terms of his indirect access to field data through the principal researcher's field notes and photographs. However, every collaborative relationship is unique, thereby requiring its own kind of structure, and role and function definitions. Clear early definitions of these parameters and ongoing negotiations are important in any collaborative process to mitigate conflicts (see Lapovsky Kennedy, 1995; Theophano & Curtis, 1996). Negotiation of mutual expectations, agreement on research protocols, and ethics are proactive ways of developing a successful working relationship.

Understanding the psychological, narrative, and methodological benefits of having an immediate, responsive audience for the field researcher's writing process was an important discovery. The catalyst of an immediate audience and respondent "thickened" and "quickened" the focused ethnographic inquiry. Thickening consists of contextualizing, interpreting, analyzing, querying, and pursuing further field data issuing from the dialogic give-and-take of the two researchers on a daily basis. The dialogue kept the researchers honest in encountering the data, overtly and covertly. Both researchers kept their dialogue at a level close to the data without imposing premature interpretations, which could have led to foreclosure and disjunction in the dialogue. Because the co-researcher maintained an attitude of curiosity and tentativeness, the dialogue heightened awareness and prompted constant reflection on both sides. Paradoxically, it opened up the aperture of the research lens while providing a sharpened focus in fieldwork. Such co-constructive exchanges added confidence to the emerging hypotheses drawn; at other times, it brought contrasting or new perspectives that helped the researchers recognize their own position-ality by virtue of their training, culture, gender, and ethnicity, a recognition that is especially important in qualitative research (Lincoln, 1995). The lending of presence and strength from one researcher to another across the miles eased the burdens carried by the field researcher and sustained the field efforts. The immediacy of dialogue and feedback further heightened the energy and alertness of the field researcher and enabled her to work at a fresh and optimal level as her experience was being processed continuously, thus clearing a space of new experience to enter. The psychological realities of fieldwork and the benefits of collaborative efforts warrant acknow-ledgement. Hence, the distance collaboration enhanced the quality of fieldwork at many levels.

The method of retrospective analysis of the researchers' fieldwork experience based on their recall primed by rereading the e-mail and field notes was a method borrowed and adapted from psychotherapy process research (Angus, 1992). Recollections of both researchers were written up as process notes. This method of using retrospective writing, reflection and analysis allowed probing into the factors that led to the success of this collaborative endeavor and the psycholo-gical dynamics that underpinned the collaboration. The use of retrospective reflexivity has the potential of contributing to more explicit roadmaps in the conducting of ethnographic fieldwork.

The collaborative process described in this paper was applied in a focused ethnography of a short, 3-week duration. It expedited and intensified the fieldwork process. Would such a process be sustainable in longer term ethnographies? What adjustments would need to be made? Would

more than two collaborators function equally well? What would be different? In addition, what we have described here is collaborative ethnography during the fieldwork phase. The collaborative process as it continues through analysis, interpretation, and writing might entail a different set of dynamics that has yet to be charted.

The collaborative dialogue in this study took the form of textual exchange occurring largely through e-mail that formed the heart of the collaborative process. Telephone calls were relatively short and served more of a social connecting function, whereas the written text allowed each researcher to reflect on each other's thoughts in depth and at his or her own pace. The suitability and strengths of different modes of distance communication for intended purposes needs to be appreciated.

The use of multimedia paralleling multisensory conveyance of the field experience to the home-based researcher was pivotal in drawing him into the field. Hence, researchers engaged in collaborative ethnography over distance should be proficient with multimedia forms of digital technology. The Internet has become an increasingly popular topic in anthropology as a site of study (Mantovani, 2001, 2002; Mitchell, 1995; Pink, 2000). Less has been discussed about the ways in which the Internet can reshape the way anthropological research is conducted, as in the distance collaboration in fieldwork reported here.

Cyberspace is already changing the way the "flattened" world is conducting business (Friedman, 2005). It has the potential of linking not only two but an indefinite number of collaborators dispersed over different geographical locations. As a tool that dissolves geographic barriers and creates virtual presences, the Internet opens up space that could dramatically alter the way ethnography, and collaborative ethnography, is conducted in the years to come, while incurring minimum extra costs and yielding sizable benefits. As technology is harnessed increasingly for research, the ethical and practice issues it raises deserve full discussion as new research designs and methods emerge. This paper is but a beginning in learning about how the Internet has made possible a distance collaborative approach to fieldwork.

Reflexivity on the process of constructing ethnography is something that has received insufficient attention in anthropology and qualitative inquiry (Geertz, 2004). Hence, ethnographic process is soil that is relatively unturned, the tilling of which could help grow our knowledge not only of methods, but of the more subtle structural, narrative, and psychological processes involved in constructing ethnography of high quality that accompanies personal and professional satisfaction.

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