Fieldwork Data Management

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Here is information about how to manage fieldwork data on a larger project, like thesis research. I will use my 2018 India fieldwork as an example.

Note that this document assumes you will video record much of your fieldwork. You can modify the advice as needed for other forms of documentation, such as field notes or audio recording.

1. Data Storage: Organization

Any ethnographic fieldwork will produce several kinds of files. At a minimum, if you are my student:

- Field notes/transcripts
- Video recordings of interviews and observations

I recommend storing field notes in a folder called Field Notes, and recordings in a folder called Recordings. For the 2018 India research, we created a folder called India Fieldwork, and inside it we created the following four folders:

- Field Notes
- Recordings
- Photos
- Other Fieldwork Documents (this is where we stored the List of Recordings and List of Field Notes – see below)

2. Data Storage: Backups

It is essential to have backups for all data files, both field notes and recordings. You never know when a technology disaster might strike. For recordings from the 2018 India fieldwork, which were the most valuable form of data, we even kept backups in two places:

- In the cloud – we used Google Drive
- On the original SD cards that were in the video recorder. We got a little booklet for storing all the completed SD cards.

3. Naming Strategy for Field Notes

It is helpful to develop a rationalized naming structure for the files. Think about what the key defining factors are that distinguish files from each other. Then come up with short abbreviations for each factor.

For the 2018 India fieldwork, we created the following naming system for fieldnotes/transcripts:
[date][a/b/c] [community] [Int/Obs] [short description]

Here is an explanation of each part of the filename:
- [date] – all of our fieldwork was done in January 2018 so we just had to identify the day of the month
- [a/b/c] – if we had more than one set of fieldnotes for a single day, we labeled them sequentially a, b, c, etc.
- [community] – we studied four indigenous communities so this was the name of the relevant one
- [Int/Obs] – interview or observation
- [short description] – name of interviewee or description of event observed

Here are some examples of actual fieldnote file names:
- 04a Lamkang Int Daniel Tholung
- 05b Lamkang Obs Youth Sports
- 11a Dimasa Obs Village Visit

4. "List of Field Notes" Document
I recommend creating a document that provides an overview of the field notes and lists key information about them. Here is what the first few lines of our List of Field Notes document looked like for the 2018 India fieldwork:

Field Notes Name	Int/Obs	Interviewees	#/ pgs
01 Lamkang Obs New Year's Celebration at Church	Obs		5
02a Lamkang Int A Sanhkil and Swamy Tholung	Int	A Sankhil [m] (requested only use first initial) Swamy Tholung [m]	30
02b Lamkang Obs Thamlapokpi Church and Soccer	Obs		4
02c Lamkang Obs Thamlapokpi Dance and Bonfire	Obs		6

Again, you can customize the table for your needs. It's just really useful to have a list of fieldnotes in the order of the data collection, and to include some other descriptive information, like names/pseudonyms of interviewees.

5. Field Notes Templates
I recommend creating templates for the field notes/transcripts, just like we did in the Design Anthropology class. The exact categories of information are customized for each project. And there may be different templates for interviews versus observations, or for different types of interviews. Most often there is one field notes template for each interview/observation guide.

The field notes always start with basic information like time of recording, description of participants, etc., and end with a reflections section. The transcription of the interview/observation forms the big middle part.

6. Naming Strategy for Recordings + "List of Recordings" Document
The video recorder will automatically assign a name to each recording, usually a string of numbers. And you may have more than one recording file for one interview, like if you had to turn the recorder off and on again for some reason.

I recommend creating a List of Recordings document that matches the recording files to the field notes files. At the same time, you can create a rationalized naming system for the recording files. In the 2018 India research, we just labelled the recordings 001, 002, 003, etc. We changed the names of the recording files on our shared computer, but the original filenames remained on the backup files. Here is what the first few lines of our List of Recordings document looked like:

Recording #	Date of recording	SD card #	Filename	Length in Minutes	Videographer	Field Notes
001	2018-01-02	05	MVI_0005	00:26	JW	02b Lamkang Obs Thamlapokpi Church and Soccer
002	2018-01-02	05	MVI_0006	03:55	JW	02b Lamkang Obs Thamlapokpi Church and Soccer
003	2018-01-02	05	MVI_0011	01:11	JW	02b Lamkang Obs Thamlapokpi Church and Soccer
004	2018-01-02	05	MVI_0012	45:44	JW	02c Lamkang Obs Dance

For your List of Recordings document, you will not need the Videographer category since you are the only researcher. But you might have other categories you want to include, like whether it's a videorecording of an in-person interview or a Zoom recording.

7. Daily Routine
Effective data management involves timely record keeping. I strongly recommend completing the following tasks every day you do fieldwork, for that day's fieldwork:
- Create and fill in field notes for all fieldwork that day. You do not need to fill in the big transcription section in the middle, but it's really valuable to note basic info like time, participants, etc., and to write out your reflections. You will forget stuff even 24 hours later.
- Put all field notes and video recordings in the appropriate folders on your computer
- Create backups of field notes and video recordings and put them in another location, for instance in the cloud
- Update the List of Recordings document
- Update the List of Field Notes document

- Watch a minute or so of each of the day's recordings, to assess visual and audio quality. If either is less than ideal, use that information to think about how you might get better quality next time. Sometimes the constraints are unavoidable, but sometimes you can learn from experience.