

NEWS & OPINIONS

The Benefits of Having Family Accompany the Ethnographer in Fieldwork

Ned Wilson

Introduction

This short excerpt recounts the benefits of having my wife, Theresa, and two of our daughters accompany me while conducting fieldwork in western Colorado. My current research is a continuation of Dallam's conversation that is situated within the masculine church in general, and the cowboy Christian in particular (Dallam 2018, 22-28). Dallam, as "a woman attending the church alone," mentions that she felt like an oddity, perceived as being a bit dangerous, and was often avoided by male congregants (27-28). Conversely, I consider myself a masculine academic of western heritage who punched cows up the mountains and raised sheep in the valley; nevertheless, I wanted to avoid a different kind of suspicion that often accompanies men who attend church alone. In other words, rather than going it alone, I anticipated that attending the cowboy church services as a family would not only garner trust more readily but would also foster a more familial relationship with both the congregation and future interlocutors.

From a parenting perspective, affording our daughters—a high school junior and senior—the opportunity to experience field research firsthand was immeasurable. Incidentally, most of our children were born and raised in western Colorado; however, we relocated to New England before the mentioned two could experience mutton busting, raising lambs, and riding horses like their older siblings.

People Take Notice

Rural, bi-vocation pastoral experience in Colorado cattle country has taught me that Sunday morning Bible studies are lightly attended. In western parlance, the ten-o'clock big service is comprised of the regulars, the once-a-month'ers, twice-a-month'ers, and a few pew poachers. The evening gatherings, however, are mostly attended by the regulars and the big guns. I suspected the cowboy church would be similar, and as such, we attended both the big service and the evening gathering.

It was during the evening gathering, though, that the girls earned their keep. As I was keeping one eye on the preacher and the other eye on the congregation, I noticed that many of the congregants were keeping both eyes on our daughters. Subsequent the final doffing of hats and a double amen, a seemingly human stampede introduced themselves to Theresa and our daughters. I, on the other hand, was little more than roadkill. However, not all was lost.

Theresa, as though on cue, acted as a single person advance team. Not only did she redirect the conversation to include my fieldwork, but with near sleight of hand, she guided several people to me who wanted to know more about my research. Meanwhile, the girls' sweet and sanguine personalities kept the conversation alive with the remainder of the congregants who wanted to visit. Before the lights were turned off, I had secured two morning breakfast meetings, a family breakfast with horse riding afterward, a dinner meeting, and a family dinner with games. I am confident that what the family accomplished in one evening would have required weeks' worth of visits.

Relaxed Setting

Concerning the interviews, I noticed a significant difference in interlocutors' body language, depth of detail, and exciting anecdotes when they shared their story with the family compared to solo interviews. Interestingly, it was during the family dinner that the girls earned their freight as well. The interview and storytelling turned into a more serious and extended conversation, so the girls excused themselves and entertained the family's younger children. Since our daughters were watching the family's children the couple felt free to share their hearts in matters that addressed the backstage of their church experience. In one evening, relationships were built, hearts shared, and a gold mine of anthropological data was gathered.

Contrariwise, during my solo interviews the interlocutors seemed more guarded when answering the same interview questions or sharing their story. The

difference could be personal dynamics; however, my years in both executive management and pastoral ministry suggest the differences lie within the safety-amongst-family schema.

Familial Support

Last, conducting research away from home is often more straining on the anthropologist's family than the anthropologist. My fieldwork rotation consisted of two weeks in western Colorado and six weeks at home. In my thirty-plus years of marriage, I can count on two hands the number of times where we did not sit down and have dinner as a family. By having my family accompany me in the field, we were able to continue what I believe is an important family custom. Additionally, I suspect our daughters felt an intangible worth—over against abandonment—by joining me in the field.

Conclusion

In the end, I am uncertain if families would have invited me into their homes for breakfast or dinner the first time they met me at church. However, I believe having the company of my family did indeed garner trust more readily and helped to build familial relationships with my interlocutors.

Reference

Dallam, Marie W. 2018. *Cowboy Christians*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.



Ned Wilson is a graduate student in Eastern University's Theological and Cultural Anthropology program. His academic interests concern congregant disenfranchisement and the masculine culture's influence over homiletics, theology, orthopraxy and subsequent efficacy of reaching the unchurched. Currently, his ethnographic study is focused on the masculine culture of a western Colorado cowboy church. Ned serves as the senior pastor of a non-denominational church in New Hampshire and volunteers as an EMT/Firefighter.

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