

VETERINARY GEOGRAPHY AS INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH*

DIANA K. DAVIS

When I worked on the Afghanistan–Pakistan border in the early 1990s as part of the Basic Veterinary Worker (BVW) Project, nearly everyone I met, from U.N. and NGO workers to journalists, was obsessed with “getting inside” Afghanistan. The expatriate community hardly talked about anything else. In much the same spirit, graduate students in geography voice eagerness to “get inside” the “field.” Certainly I did. Yet adequate preparation for geographical field research is crucial. Taking extra time at the start of doctoral work to develop specific skills, instead of rushing headlong and headstrong to the field, makes substantive interdisciplinary research possible. The incorporation of interdisciplinary training into preparations for field research provides unique benefits. These include the potential to pose new research questions, to develop new or different methods for exploring existing research questions, and to adapt novel modes of analysis and interpretation to research findings. The geographical subfields of political and cultural ecology have produced successful scholars who are increasingly conducting just this kind of research.

Tackling interdisciplinary research can, however, be difficult, time consuming, and professionally risky. Because the results of high-quality interdisciplinary research in geography are rewarding, in this essay I outline some hard-won suggestions for the preparation and execution of interdisciplinary field research. I use, as case in point, my work on the political ecology of pastoralism, an example that includes methods drawn from veterinary medicine. Having recently completed an interdisciplinary doctoral dissertation, I address finishing strategies that may be helpful to doctoral students and young scholars. Each of you who reads this, though, will likely have a different skill set and your own distinct possibilities.

VETERINARY GEOGRAPHY?

Formal interdisciplinarity is something I stumbled on more or less by accident. After attempting fieldwork in Morocco at the master’s level, I naively thought I could be of more help to pastoralists if I were a veterinarian. I didn’t fully understand at the time that most problems faced by pastoralists and their livestock were caused by underlying structural problems of poverty and state oppression rather than by livestock disease. Thus, after finishing my master’s degree in geography I concluded

* I am indebted to my adviser, Michael Watts, and my committee members at the University of California, Berkeley—Louise Fortmann, David Hooson, Lynn Huntsinger, and Edmund Burke (University of California, Santa Cruz)—for their training, guidance, and support during my doctoral work. I am also grateful for my training at the Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine (including my experiences with the Basic Veterinary Worker Project), particularly to James Ross, David Sherman, Al Sollod, Chip Stem, and John Woodford. Research funding was gratefully received from the Social Science Research Council, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the University of California, Berkeley, and the Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine. The comments of Paul Starrs and the anonymous reviewers were very helpful in revising this essay.

✎ DR. DAVIS is an assistant professor of geography at the University of Texas, Austin, Texas 78712.