

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE



American Journal of Human Biology

WILEY

There and back again: The biosocial dynamics of returning from the field

Mallika S. Sarma¹ | Theresa E. Gildner² | Michaela E. Howells³ |
Sheina Lew-Levy^{4,5} | Benjamin C. Trumble^{6,7} | Agustín Fuentes⁸

¹Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, Baltimore, Maryland, USA

²Department of Anthropology, Washington University in St. Louis, St. Louis, Missouri, USA

³Department of Anthropology, University of North Carolina Wilmington, Wilmington, North Carolina, USA

⁴Department of Psychology, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada

⁵Department of Archaeology and Heritage Studies, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark

⁶School of Human Evolution and Social Change, Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona, USA

⁷Center for Evolution and Medicine, Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona, USA

⁸Department of Anthropology, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey, USA

Correspondence

Mallika S. Sarma, Ph.D., Postdoctoral Research Fellow, 710 Ross Research Building, Human Spaceflight Lab, Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, Baltimore, MD, USA.
Email: msarma1@jhu.edu

Funding information

Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, Grant/Award Number: Postdoctoral Fellowship (Award no. 56-2019-0102); National Institutes of Health, Grant/Award Number: T-32 NSRA; National Institutes of Health/ National Institute on Aging, Grant/Award Number: RF1 AG054442

Abstract

Background: Leaving “home” to pursue fieldwork is a necessity but also a rite of passage for many biological anthropology/human biology scholars. Field-based scientists prepare for the potential changes to activity patterns, sleep schedules, social interactions, and more that come with going to the field. However, returning from extended fieldwork and the reverse-culture shock, discomforts, and mental shifts that are part of the return process can be jarring, sometimes traumatic experiences. A failure to acknowledge and address such experiences can compromise the health and wellbeing of those returning.

Aims: We argue for an engaged awareness of the difficult nature of returning from the field and offer suggestions for individuals and programs to better train and prepare PhD students pursuing fieldwork.

Materials & Methods: Here, we offer personal stories of “coming back” and give professional insights on how to best ready students and scholars for returning from fieldwork.

Discussion/Conclusion: By bringing forward and normalizing the difficulty of the fieldwork-return process, we hope that this reflection acts as a tool for future scholars to prepare to come home as successfully and consciously as possible.

1 | INTRODUCTION

As consummate niche constructors on multiple scales, humans have the ability, and tendency, to make even the most unfamiliar familiar. This process requires work and energy, but human plasticity, flexibility, and creativity

enables us to acclimatize, or even adapt, to novel spaces and experiences. Most would agree that understanding these processes is core to bioanthropological work on human variation and adaptation, but few recognize how relevant these perspectives are to understanding our own research experiences, especially that of going to *and*



returning from the field. The geospatial movement, the cross-cultural shifts, and the biosocial trials and tribulations that accompany the entire fieldwork process are aptly condensed by the subtitle of *The Hobbit* “there and back again.” In this essay, we offer personal and professional insights into the “back again” aspect of fieldwork arguing that we need to both (1) be more cognizant of its often problematic and difficult nature across all career stages and (2) fold such awareness into the training and preparation of PhD students across the broad range of work involving human biology and fieldwork.

Going to the field, wherever that might be, is often central to the practice of anthropological work. An anthropologist's role is to immerse oneself in another society, observe, measure, and assess individuals “elsewhere” to construct a better understanding of the surrounding world and the human role(s) in it. While “elsewhere” can be in a place physically/culturally distant from an individual's lived experience or can be a place personally familiar like an ancestral homeland or current community but still requires adopting new roles and perspectives, such tasks require one to step away from *home*, along with its schedules, structures, and familiarities. This process of change is understood to be difficult; thus, preparing to go to the field is approached with rigor. There are seminars, credited coursework, and whole books (see Hewlett, 2019; Ice et al., 2015; MacClancy & Fuentes, 2013), dedicated to preparing novice anthropologists with the initial discomforts, culture shock, and mental shifts needed to approach fieldwork in a productive and healthy way. However, while the stress of *going to* the field is often anticipated and acknowledged, what happens when *coming back* is frequently not.

Comparatively, there is very little professional, social, and emotional preparation for the eventual end of fieldwork, the “back again.” In this phase, the changes that were experienced when going to the field are now, in essence, happening in reverse, accompanied by the compounded knowledge, customs and habits acquired during the fieldwork itself. As a result, the researcher who returns is not identical to the individual who left. The home they left has also not remained frozen in a state of cryogenic familiarity. Life goes on. Here, we acknowledge the complexity, diversity, and difficulty of the “back again” and share individual experiences of returning from the field. We also include some of our collective thoughts on modes for better training future fieldworkers. Our goal is to normalize the difficulty and shed light on what the process has been like for a range of scholars at different stages of their careers when they returned from dissertation field sites around the world. We hope that this will be used as a tool for future

students and scholars to prepare to come home as successfully and consciously as possible.

2 | CONTEXT

Changes in activity patterns, sleep schedules, social interactions, and diets are known to have substantial physiological and psychological impacts on the human body and mind (Lieberman, 2014). These transitions are generally anticipated and prepared for when adjusting to the fieldwork environment, but it seems less so on return. In addition, some of the changes that were made to adapt to fieldwork conditions, from speaking different languages to culturally specific practices of eating, drinking, physical activity (or lack thereof), smoking, or ameliorative prescription drug use (i.e., sleeping pills, digestives, painkillers) may not translate effectively to everyday life back home and can create challenges.

Fieldwork stints may vary in duration; but no matter the length, field seasons can disrupt home life, and often require committed engagement to invest substantively, socially, and emotionally with new communities. Logistical (e.g., time zone differences, hours needed for participant observation) and technological restrictions (e.g., lack of access to internet or electricity) can hamper even the best of intentions to maintain sufficient social ties with home. Changed or broken ties with family and friends are also common, a reality often not anticipated by those new to fieldwork. Cumulatively, these factors may include ‘reverse’ culture shock when a researcher returns home, forcing researchers to reinterpret their lives and adjust to new ways of being.

For those who work intensively with communities and engage in “deep hanging out” (Rosaldo, 1994) as part of their field experience, coming back to lab work and article writing—activities done frequently in solitude, or in the formal confines of the academic landscape—can be isolating and depressing. Without the proper time and capacity to process the fieldwork experience, the actual production of knowledge, such as transforming field data to an academic article (not to mention a dissertation!) can be exceedingly difficult. Further, returning to the pace and patterns of academic and scholarly life (e.g., conferences, programmatic requirements, productivity/publishing expectations, grant writing, social media immersion, departmental politics, stress regarding next projects/positions, etc.) can induce negative responses, including panic and despair. Some of these psychological states arising from such a transition can be long lasting. The lack of acknowledgement, attention, and care given to these processes further exacerbates these issues and can lead to a range of adverse outcomes, ranging from

discontent and ennui to more serious anxiety and depression.

The issues with coming “back again” are serious and deserve both scholarly attention and social care. Here, we offer examples of departing to the field and returning to the United States/United Kingdom. This provides a degree of connectivity across the some of the readership, but we recognize that a serious engagement with this issue will require a much broader discussion across multiple voices and home locations. We hope that this article will at least initiate broader conversations, both within and between institutions and professional organizations. Here are the authors’ stories of “back again.”

3 | STORIES

3.1 | Mallika Sarma (Rocky Mountains, USA)

I have always strived to be a Highly Productive Person. Always with at least two different checklists in hand and comfortable with the epithets of being “overprepared” and “intense”, I found that my energy was a perfect fit for doing really good fieldwork. I loved the speed and intensity of being in the field, trying to get as much, and as thorough, data as possible while engaging and connecting with my field assistants and participants. My “fieldwork life” became my world while my family and friends back home, always supportive although slightly confused, yet nonetheless impressed and proud of my seemingly glamorous occupation, faded into the back of my priorities. In the field, I learned to loosen. I unclenched and took in, moved with the flow, made cozy in what made me most uncomfortable, because it was the only way to be. Returning, however, was a calcifying process, stiffening to the expectations of the academic and research world, of life back home, and of my own ambition. Reconciling my field-self with my returned-self was hard.

As a human biologist studying adaptations to extreme environments, I have been fortunate to do fieldwork in some of the most remote and gorgeous places on Earth. The beauty of my different field sites made returning to post-industrial midwestern America particularly bleak. During graduate school, I lived alone with my cat (who was happily boarded and spoiled rotten by my parents during my field seasons), which was far from the usual intensive social communities I formed while in the field. Although the physical distance was not much, when I returned home from dissertation fieldwork, I felt like I had come back to a different world. I was not prepared for the intense loneliness and blanket despair I felt.

Compared to my other fieldwork experiences, dissertation fieldwork and eventual return felt like it should have been easy. I worked in Central Wyoming, still in the United States, speaking English, with access to internet (mostly), and within relatively close range of my immediate family. With the exception of some race-related vigilance (after all, I was a brown woman alone in a notoriously red state during the Trump era) and watching out for blizzards or an odd grizzly bear, my attention could be singularly focused on data collection. Without the need of a sat phone or anything else equally cumbersome, every now and then my committee checked in on me and friends kept me in the loop with the petty drama and happenings back home, but never enough to disturb me from my immersion into my new community.

But after the high of fieldwork, that Highly Productive Person had collapsed into a Barely Functioning Person, wrapped in blankets on the divan consuming Netflix with the same purpose and rigor I brought to the field. Somehow, the conspicuous whiteness and wealth of my then home institution was *more* overwhelming and suffocating than what I experienced in the American West. My fieldwork experience existed in my head, but I could only partially share it with my support system and their consistent, but distant, support suddenly felt inadequate. Everything felt more tenuous getting back into the data when I was so far away from the source. What if all my data were bad? Or worse, what if my work was inconsequential? There were other, less-existential issues. As I think is common, I struggled with food a lot on return. When in the field it was “eat what you can get,” which was necessary and sometimes glorious. However, on return, without the social cues that come from eating in a community, I would just not. Or I would fall back on “eat what you can get” to my own detriment.

What made me an excellent field anthropologist felt like my undoing on returning: an all-encompassing deep investment in my work and community and the subsequent loss thereof. I was forced to realize that reformation of one’s home community requires targeted investment, just as much as in the field. I found that planning time off with my people in the transition between field seasons and everyday life allowed me to reconnect with them as well as properly mark the end of one momentous thing and the beginning of another. I needed both official and unofficial gatherings of other fieldwork-returning friends to talk about the transitions back. I relied on conferences and other professional meetings where I could just be around other people who would *get it*. I joined a dissertation support group where we could talk through the struggles of writing and the feelings of never getting enough done. I also threw myself back into my hobbies and athletic training and began



paying attention to everyday life again. I recognized that at home, particularly immediately after coming back from the field, I required a strict schedule and diet, including scheduled writing, work-out, and relaxation time and even automated reminders to eat and drink water (that I keep to this day), to stay healthy and sane. But perhaps the most important of all was re-engaging in friendships and relationships back home with gusto.

Three years after completing dissertation fieldwork, I am only now slowly recovering to what I understand is my new pace. As I embark on a new area of research, I see these transition steps when returning from the field as critical to other major transitions in my life, including getting married, moving cross-country, and starting a new job. If anything, I have learned that making home again is the only real constant.

3.2 | Sheina Lew-Levy (Central Congo Basin)

“I think you should come home.” Five months into what was meant to be a 6-month field trip in the Republic of Congo, I called my supervisor. I had started fieldwork in a village while assisting another researcher, sharing a teary goodbye before heading into the forest to stay in a BaYaka forager forest camp. Now, the camp was planning to move to a remote fishing pond. My interpreter had to go back to his job as a schoolteacher. I had to decide whether I would follow my participants on my own or go home.

Today, 5 years and four field seasons later, the field has become a second home. I text my interpreters constantly, asking if they have received any news from the community I work with. I dream of running and singing in torrential downpours with the teenage girls. I light candles and mourn when I learn that friends I have made in the field have passed on. I crave a meal of forest tubers and drinking palm wine by the fire. When I submitted my PhD, it was returning to the field after—the nighttime laughter, the quiet evenings, games with children—that helped me feel whole again. But during that first field season, I struggled. I felt disconnected from my interpreter, who seemed eager for work to end each day so he could ditch me and go talk to his new friends. A usually sedentary person, I walked miles and miles daily, in the rain, hip-deep in ponds, following children as they wove through the forest to forage and play. The rice and beans I had purchased went moldy. The food my interlocutors shared with me, although delicious, seemed to offer little in the form of nutrition, likely because I had not yet developed the gut bacteria necessary to digest it (Schnorr et al., 2014). I remember eating a can of sardines in my

tent when everyone had gone to bed at night, crying (I hate sardines). Having assumed a tropical rainforest would be, well, tropical, I had brought a flimsy sleeping bag liner in which I shivered throughout the night. I turned my sat phone on every night, desperate for text messages from home.

I found respite with the women and the children. Any free moment I had, I sat near the women, listening to their conversations, trying to decipher their words and meanings. Sometimes the women called me over to ask me questions and tell me stories. Other times they seemed annoyed I was there. The children, on the other hand, seemed thrilled to have me around. They taught me to speak Yaka, play games, and understand social norms by correcting me when I transgressed them. They started my fire every morning. They seemed bemused when it became clear I could not identify *koko* (*Gnetum africanum*) a generic looking, but highly nutritious leafy green. I remember sitting by my fire at night, my eyes closed, listening to the chatter and laughter and occasional whines of babies as they settled. I remember laughing from my tent, along with everyone else, when one camp member was reprimanded by his wife for snoring loudly in the night. These social bonds kept me going. But, by the time I called my supervisor, I felt that my body was wearing out. I cannot remember now whether I suggested I come home, or whether he could hear the exhaustion in my voice. What I do remember is feeling a deep sense of relief when I agreed that coming home was probably best. The camp was relieved too—the families I stayed with were always very concerned about my safety, and I think they could sense I was drained.

Professionally, my transition back to university life seemed successful. There was data to enter and clean, and a new field season to plan. Personally, I was a mess. I was so thin I could see my ribs and spine poking out through my skin—my partner said I looked like a deflated balloon. At Christmas, I snuck into my partner's parents' kitchen at midnight to eat microwaved cheese on crackers. I was constantly worried about the well-being of my interlocutors, who had no access to medical services in the bush. I called my mom crying. “You've always found transitions difficult” she would say. I picked fights with my partner constantly, finding it difficult to settle back into coupled life.

Therefore, for better or worse, I leaned into my work. Specifically, I leaned into data entry. So mind-numbingly boring, I could watch TV while I plugged away at my Excel file. I entered focal follows to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, interviews to *Gilmore Girls*, field notes to *The Office*. I felt effective even as I felt lazy. These shows followed me to bed, where I spent any of the time I wasn't working. When my partner complained that I was

polluting our soundscape, I turned the volume down—but only slightly. The familiar storylines (I have watched these shows since I was a teenager) and simple characters kept me company, helped me fall asleep, kept my buzzing mind still. It took 2 months for my weight and mood to regulate and for me to feel more comfortable with silence, just in time for the next field season.

With more years of experience under my belt, I have learned how to ‘do’ fieldwork. I now know what gear works at my field site. I pack a duffle bag of Clif bars and instant oats. I speak Yaka well enough to share jokes with the women and tease the children. My body has become more resilient too: it takes less time for my sleep, digestion, and muscles to adjust to the physical demands of my work.

But returning from the field continues to be a struggle. I still pick fights, I still worry, and I still eat cheese at midnight. I still watch too much TV when I get home. Over the years, I have learned a few things the hard way: until my metabolism regulates, I should be careful with what I eat and how much I drink; my partner is incredibly forgiving; transitions are indeed hard, and they probably always will be.

3.3 | Theresa Gildner (Southeastern Ecuador)

After four previous field seasons, I naïvely believed I was fully prepared for my transition from fieldwork to final data analysis and dissertation writing. I had spent months in Amazonian Ecuador as a member of the Shuar Health and Life History Project collecting data examining lifestyle patterns, hormone levels, and parasitic infection. This last season marked the end of data collection; however, as I transitioned from the field, I was simultaneously juggling several life changes (e.g., my recent marriage, move to a new city, and impending transition out of grad school). In addition, the field season took place in the fall rather than summer, truncating my timeline to finish laboratory analyses and write my dissertation before defending in the spring, adding stress during the post-fieldwork transition period.

Because I was applying for jobs while in Ecuador, I had to periodically travel back into town to access the internet. While there were benefits to this arrangement, including restaurant food and hot showers, these trips resulted in a series of “mini-transitions” between data collection and my life back home, which made it difficult in many ways to maintain the mentality I needed to focus on data collection. Trips to town were disruptive in other ways. Several important news stories broke while I was in the field that year—including the Las Vegas mass

shooting—and it was very difficult to read about these events so far from my family and friends, an experience not unique to this particular field season.

Throughout my fieldwork, the news dump experienced upon regaining access to the internet was been one of the most difficult aspects of transitioning. It can be overwhelming to learn about distressing world events you have missed while off the grid, especially when loved ones back home have had time to process the news. Emotional support offered by study teammates also learning about these news stories for the first time can be extremely helpful. My teammates were often open to discussing these world events at length as we all came to terms with the news, while loved ones back home were sometimes less willing to dwell on these stories if they had already spent time grappling with their implications.

I found that the lifestyle and dietary changes associated with prolonged fieldwork consistently result in unexpected lingering physical effects. These changes include an inability to easily consume many typical American foods for weeks after returning from the field. This was especially difficult during my final field season because I returned the week of Thanksgiving. While glad to be home in time to celebrate with my family, I was unable to eat most of my favorite holiday food. I learned that, while it may be tempting to enjoy all your favorite treats immediately upon returning home, you need to be patient and allow your body time to readjust back to your usual diet and activity patterns.

A final complication at the end of my dissertation data collection was a long delay in international sample shipment from Ecuador to the United States. I called shipping representatives in Ecuador and the US daily, but it still took weeks for the samples to finally arrive safely in the lab, leading to considerable anxiety about whether I would be able to analyze my data and finish my dissertation on time. As someone who has never dealt well with deviations from set plans, one of the most challenging aspects of fieldwork for me has been accepting that things rarely go exactly as expected. My experience with sample shipment highlights how even the best laid data collection and analysis plans may be affected by factors outside of your control. In these instances, the ability to pivot and restructure is key. By shifting my writing schedule while I waited for samples, I was still able to finish my degree the following spring as planned.

Throughout this difficult transition period, the support of my dissertation committee, friends, and family was critically important in helping me adjust and finish my PhD. My fellow graduate students and research teammates played a huge role, as our shared experiences enabled them to empathize with my concerns and offer valuable advice. I have found that building social time



into my schedule to maintain these supportive relationships is invaluable. For example, I participated in weekly trivia nights with other graduate students, research teammates, and friends outside of academia. This friend group has been an incredibly important source of support, providing a space to share my frustrations and ask for input.

However, while the encouragement of others may ease the transition out of the field, I also found that it is essential to allow for personal time, ideally taking a few days once to you leave the field to decompress and get a little distance from your project. This space can help you transition from field-related stressors and routines, while also providing needed time to process your experiences. For me, this meant spending time in activities that did not require much critical thought, such as catching up on TV shows or movies I missed while in the field or pleasure reading. Additionally, allowing yourself some time to adjust (both mentally and physically) may help your study in the long term, leaving you recharged and ready to hit the ground running when you jump back into data cleaning and analysis.

3.4 | Ben Trumble (Lowland Bolivia)

When conducting field research, you realize that there are many things you were never taught in grad school. For example, I never took a course that prepared me for animal husbandry (what do you look for when buying a cow? what is a fair price? how many people will it feed?), nor did my hominid paleo-anatomy courses teach me the best way to butcher a peccary (hint: do not puncture the bladder). Do not get me wrong, I had excellent mentors who helped shape my research and taught me much, from how to hold a pipette, to how to conduct interviews, but they could not prepare me for everything. My days conducting research following hunters and collecting saliva samples were long, starting with a pre-dawn hike to a hunter's house, followed by hunting for 12 h or more over rough terrain. Nighttime came quickly, so by the time I got to my tent, I only had an hour or two to eat and enter data before I was sleeping in preparation for the next day. Meals were simple with little choice—they were dictated by the fish I could catch, the meat hunters gifted me, or the canned foods I brought with me.

Oddly, the thing I was least prepared for was getting back to grad school and all the sudden, free time and personal choice. Sure, I had long days in the lab analyzing samples and fulfilling my duties as a research assistant, but my day started later and ended earlier than in the field. Instead of being excited about free time, it provided stress. No longer did I have a singular task, but instead many; finishing my dissertation, finding a postdoc,

catching up with friends and family, getting back to the gym, seeing all of the movies, television, and internet memes I had missed. Instead of the river deciding which fish I ate for dinner, or a hunter's skill determining if peccary was on the menu, I was overwhelmed with choice at the supermarket. Not only did I have the option of buying meat, but I could also get a different dozen cuts from a dozen different animals all in the same refrigerated display—the hundreds of daily choices honestly felt paralyzing.

The bolus of time meant that I was not spending every waking moment on my all-consuming goal of increasing knowledge (it was a long time ago, and I was still young and naïve with delusions of grandeur). All of those options meant time away from conducting research, and that was why I wanted to be scientist, so I began to feel guilt whenever I was not working. If I was not going to be singularly focused on research, should not I have just gotten a job after college instead of spending more than half a decade in grad school? Even after being home for a month, I still did not feel I had caught up with all of my friends, which made me feel like I had let them down, but at the same time, catching up with them was also preventing me from finishing my dissertation. Without a singular goal, I felt like I was being pulled in many directions.

In retrospect, I should have talked to friends, family, or a therapist about these feelings. I eventually realized that so many aspects of fieldwork are uncertain (weather, vehicular issues, injury, illness), and I was able to cope with that uncertainty because I had a clear goal. When I got back, I no longer had to face flash floods or trucks stuck in the mud, but instead a different kind of uncertainty about how I should be focusing my time and energy. Much like butchering a peccary, it was not something that could be taught in graduate school, but something I had to experience and learn with my own hands. Over time I began to feel less guilty, found the focus I needed, and became better at multi-tasking (as I write this at night, over a week past the deadline...let us just say it is a work in progress).

3.5 | Michaela Howells (Indonesia and American Samoa)

Leaving home was easy. Why was coming back so hard? My undergraduate study abroad in Indonesia was transformative, exciting, and exhausting. It challenged me in ways I never knew possible and laid the groundwork for becoming a successful graduate student and professional. It was a gentle but intense introduction to fieldwork. I pushed through my limits and in some cases established

them (turns out car sickness is not improved in a foreign country in the back of a van winding through curvy roads). My worldview expanded. I met the love of my life. I took my first steps toward becoming a field anthropologist.

Returning home was so much harder than I had ever expected. Entering back into my life felt constrictive, hollow, and lonely. As a first-generation college student, my family had no framework to draw upon. My family and friends were happy to see me, but they did not seem interested in my experience. They did not want to hear stories or look at pictures. I had the distinct feeling that I was boring people. My life changing adventure was less interesting to them then catching me up on their daily lives. There were stinging comments about my “vacation”. I went from living in a very social group setting in Bali, attending my first professional conference in China (International Primate Society), and traveling through Hong Kong, Singapore, and Malaysia with my newfound partner—to being unceremoniously back in my childhood bedroom.

My life had totally changed. I had left a different person then when I returned and was shocked by this discordance. Simultaneously, I had the distressing feeling that it never happened. That I had imagined the biggest experience of my life to date, that everything I had grown into would dissipate or wither away. I knew how I wanted to spend my career and was scared it would never happen. Years later, I realized that I was terrified that this would be the highlight of my life, that it would be the last chance I would have to experience fieldwork, and that my fledgling relationship would wither with distance. Thankfully, I was wrong on all fronts. Returning to school helped my mental health substantially. Faculty were genuinely excited for my experiences, and I was surrounded by others who had returned from their own field schools. The realization that I felt more at home at school than my parent's home was simultaneously jarring, confusing, and comforting.

Ten years later I was preparing to come home from my two-year dissertation fieldwork in American Samoa. The idea that I would get funding and complete my dissertation research was so fantastical to me that I had not imagined my return. I had spent my whole academic life preparing for my dissertation fieldwork but gave little thought to re-entry. All of my belongings were packed away. My office space gone to make room for other students. My home-space vacated to free up space for my husband to take in a roommate to defray our costs, and for easy moving if necessary while I was overseas. But it also made for easier divestment if our relationship ended while I was abroad—ours would not have been the first marriage to end during fieldwork.

I created a comfortable life for myself in American Samoa. I felt useful, purpose driven, and smart. I worked

hard and faced challenges but felt the most fit and relaxed I had been in years. It was the first time in my life I had lived alone. I enjoyed the community I was a part of and was heart-broken to leave. I returned with more questions than I left with. My re-entry was made possible by some serious mental gymnastics. I had to convince myself that I would come back to the mainland United States long enough to finish my PhD and then would move closer to the ocean and warm weather. Colorado's climate seemed antithetical to American Samoa's and provided an icy highlight of the differences between my lives. I was depressed and felt like I was finished in academia.

As raw as this time felt, it was made easier through staged re-entry, patience from my friends and loved ones, and the addition of our Samoan dog Uli. Uli provided consistency during re-entry between my two homes. She helped stave off the feeling of disconnection and discordance and eased the process. I had set my schedule so that I would not need to be at my desk writing until a month after I returned. This gave me the space to experience my intertwined feelings of loss, pride, relief, and despair without immediately being expected to have an intellectual engagement with my experience. I exercised, learned how to cook, and listened to music. I felt sorry for myself and missed the life I stepped away from. In retrospect, I am thankful my loved ones and advisors were able to provide the space for me to grieve before moving onto the next stage of my life.

Now, as a tenured faculty member, fieldwork is a more predictable occurrence. Re-entry from the field is easier for me now due to improved technology and contact, social media, collaborative work with those who I can reenter with, increased career and financial security, strong family support, and personal behavioral changes that make the process easier. I have discovered that it is critical that I schedule buffer time into my return schedule. When possible, I schedule a few days alone on my travels home. These days create a liminal space for me to readjust to re-entry. This is not vacation time, but instead time to be alone, type up my field notes, and enter data. It provides crucial mental space from the conflicting pressures of fieldwork and home-life, and time for radical self-care. This practice provides important mental space before I fully re-enter, while forcing me to slow down and process my experiences before refocusing on reconnecting.

3.6 | Agustín Fuentes (Mentawai islands, Indonesia)

Unlike most folks doing their dissertation fieldwork today, when I embarked 30 years ago for my project there



was a more limited range of communication options. In fact, as the field site was on the island of Pagai Utara, Mentawai, West Sumatra, Indonesia, I had no option for connecting to my family, advisor, and friends (platonic and romantic) aside from a 2- to 3-day journey from the field site to Padang, Sumatra, that involved three boats, ~4 h of hiking and ~18 h of sea travel, in each direction and was completely dependent on the weather. I note this to lay clear that aside from once every 6–8 weeks or so I was not in contact with “my” world at all (except for some BBC on shortwave on Sundays). And the field experience, while in some ways the best experience of my life, was really rough and simultaneously one of the worst. In late 1992, before my original end date but very much just in time, I left the field site, made my way to Jakarta and boarded a plane for the United States. A lot had transpired, and I was mentally and physically wiped out: I had lost 25 pounds (~16% of my pre-project body weight), my girlfriend of the time, and any sense of what I was “doing” or why I was doing it.

I was on a plane to Los Angeles that stopped over in Hawaii. At 40 000 feet, somewhere over the Pacific, I decided that I had enough and that this whole academic thing was not for me. I argued my way off the plane at Hawaii, picked up my backpack and spent the next few weeks trying to find myself in a new place (I had never been there outside of the airport before), with only one contact (the aforementioned ex-girlfriend). I set myself up, got a little work and a space to set my stuff, and called my Advisor to let her know I was out of the PhD thing and my Mom to tell her where I was. Both women, in hindsight, were right on target in their approach with me. They were kind and calm, talked me through the moment, convinced me to just breathe and take some time. The world would not stop even if I stepped out for a spell. Time passed without thinking about anything related to my project, my “career” or my future aside from a lot of internal dialogue about existentialism, loneliness, William Burroughs (a long story), and what being a haole was like. In retrospect, I recognize I was steeped in anthropology, in what I love about the discipline, but did not realize it at the time.

Eventually, and I guess expectedly (at least by my Advisor and my Mom), I realized I needed to head back home, to the San Francisco Bay Area where both my Mother’s house and my PhD program were and figure out what I was going to do. On the plane back to the continent it occurred to me that maybe I had not completely failed. Maybe I had indeed done something all that time in the rainforest, with the Mentawains, the langurs, gibbons, snakes and acid spitting ants. I just did not yet know what that was.

Coming back to campus (UC Berkeley) took a while (of me living on my Mom’s couch and feeling sorry for

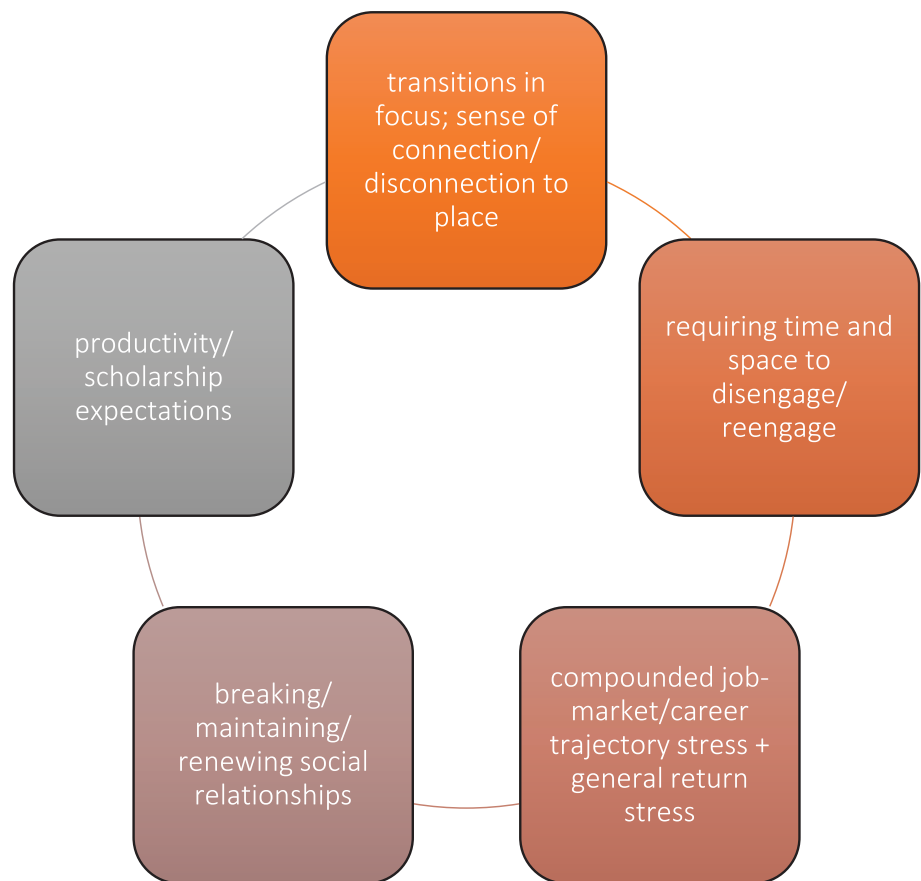
myself). But once I did, my Advisor, my friends and my family recognized the trauma (both externally experienced and self-induced) and they offered a soft landing, during which I began to remember why I had gone to graduate school in the first place. My fellow graduate students formed a bubble of friendship and facilitation, I re-enrolled, and walked back into TA’ing. Slowly but surely over the course of ~6 months, I began to pull out my notes, my data, my drawings, and developed more than 40 rolls of film. At that point, seeing what I *had* done, recognizing the shortcomings and faults, but realizing that something of value had occurred. Principal of which, was substantive growth in my ability to think with and about ecology, biology, behavior and what the world is like. That is when my path as a scholar genuinely started.

4 | DISCUSSION

It is important to remember that coming back is part of the journey. In rare cases, students leave for the field and choose not to return. However, while accurate statistics are hard to find, there is the sense that more commonly a noninsignificant percentage of graduate students do return from dissertation fieldwork but then decide to no longer continue their PhD. This may be in part due to the trauma of “back again.” Although not everyone who leaves academia does so because of this specifically, we hope that the vignettes here—from scholars with different experiences—help illuminate the black box of returning from the field. One goal of sharing these experiences is to dissipate stigma surrounding the struggle to return, while also informing efforts to support students through the transition back home.

While the process of returning from the field is unique for each individual, we have identified five common themes connecting the vignettes shared here that are likely factors shaping the re-entry process (Figure 1). First, many researchers struggle with the transition from singularly focused work to the numerous, sometimes overwhelming, responsibilities and expectations at home. Second, there is the need for time to “zone out” and create buffer time between fieldwork and continued research. These vignettes demonstrate that this buffer time can manifest as planning an end-of-fieldwork celebration, watching television, or even taking an extended pit-stop in Hawaii. They also demonstrate how this buffer time is necessary for both mental and physical recovery. Third, it is apparent that the stress of returning from the field is often heightened by the stress that comes with anticipating and preparing for the transition from a PhD program to a postdoc or faculty position. A fourth common theme is the central importance and tenacity of

FIGURE 1 Five common factors influencing re-entry. We have identified five of the most common factors that likely impact individuals as they go through the re-entry process. These factors are connected and some or all can contribute to the additive and compounded stressors of returning home



social relationships; there is the fear or actuality of romantic endings, ignoring or leaning into friends and family, and the challenges from transitioning from one community to another. Lastly, individuals tend to struggle with expectations of productivity and/or data analysis, where work (or lack thereof) can be used as a crutch to avoid dealing with the challenges posed by returning from the field. It is also important to note that these common concerns do not occur in isolation, but are often experienced simultaneously, further compounding the stress experienced during the transition “back again”.

Open and more transparent discussion about the struggles of returning from the field should be encouraged and normalized. Particularly in light of an ongoing changing fieldwork environment, whether it be due to travel restrictions or greater reliance on virtual data collection, we must value and create a space to discuss what it means to return. We conclude this reflection with a few suggestions for researchers, and for programs, to make the “back again” experience part and parcel of the training and expectations of fieldwork (see Figure 2). Below, we suggest specific action items that individuals and programs can implement to ameliorate the re-entry crises and facilitate a more successful anthropological experience.

4.1 | Action items for researchers

4.1.1 | Prepare for the return

Although there is tremendous diversity between field experiences and re-entry situations, there are ways that individuals can prepare for the return. Being honest with yourself about your experiences before you are back can help you recognize what you will need when you return. It can also help you untangle the commonly experienced jumble of emotions. This kind of frank self-reflection can take many forms; for example, journaling or freewriting gives you space to be brutally honest and vulnerable in a way you do not have to share with others. It can help you process your re-entry experiences and provide a crucial pause for breath. These writings can also help you determine how to talk to your support system in a meaningful way. You can also write up a more formalized fieldwork report, where you denote what went well and what went poorly. While this documentation can be kept to yourself, it can help with eventual grant reporting and manuscript methods. Additionally, having this information pre-written may relieve some of the reticence experienced when having to write up these details later.



FIGURE 2 Action items for researchers and institutions. We suggest specific action items that individual researchers and institutions/programs can implement to begin to ameliorate the re-entry crises and facilitate a more successful research experience

In addition, preparing to return can include finding small rituals that you can sustain from location to location. Perhaps it is listening to certain songs or re-reading a book, continuing an exercise regime or engaging in some other kind of regular physical activity. You can also bring meaningful rituals home with you; for instance, a colleague still sweeps her house every day like she was taught by her host family in the Central African Republic. These behaviors play an important role in processing experiences. Some may feel that processing these emotions and experiences in these ways is somehow weakening or indicates their lack of suitability in the field. However, we encourage you to recognize this process as helping to transition into a healthy work-nonwork life integration and can help clear your mind.

4.1.2 | Create a support system

Family and friends outside of academia may have no framework to understand your experience or the challenges you may face upon re-entry. Talking to them prior to leaving and re-entry may help reduce this gulf of

information. Share a friend's experiences to help prepare them for yours. Give them a copy of this article. Also, seek out other people who recently returned from the field to confide in who can empathize with your experiences and share their own. Walk together, share meals, or binge watch a show that everyone else watched while you were away. Support systems can and should include faculty members in your department who can act as allies and help provide authority in protecting your time and re-entry. While this can be your primary advisor, it is better to have multiple faculty members that look out for you. Even with the most supportive primary advisor, multiple mentors, particularly those in positions of authority in the department, can help ease the transition.

4.1.3 | Give yourself space and time as needed

The expectation that graduate students and professionals should be able to seamlessly transition between field sites and academic homes is not only misleading, but does a disservice to our field. Elaborated in the vignettes above, in academia, many feel the pressure to continuously

work, resulting in feelings of guilt when taking personal time and setting work-life boundaries. However, it is necessary to recognize that being kind to yourself upon re-entry is important for both physical and mental health. This includes creating an interstitial space for yourself that enables you to process this transition. This could be establishing literal space, for instance days or weeks taken in a neutral location. It can also be metaphorical and emotional space, clarifying to friends and family that you may need some time and distance before reconnecting. It may even be helpful to enlist close friends or family members to act as your buffer between you and more insistent loved ones. Be honest with yourself and your advisors about the time you will need to transition back, including dedicated time for nonwork events and the expected lag in pace and productivity that will likely occur upon return.

This transition back is physical and mental. As shown in the vignettes, your physical body and its capacity for work, exercise, digestion, and more, will have likely shifted in the field. This may manifest in changes in diet, body composition, or even physiological function. It may take time to come back to a familiar state, and sometimes instead will transform into a new normal. Mental changes occur in conjunction with changed physicality. Arriving home after time “elsewhere” means a sudden mental shift not just about your changed physical state but also in adjusting back to cultural or environmental norms. This shift includes processing how your feelings about these norms may have changed. This can include dissonance, guilt, and helplessness in reconciling the abundance, wealth, and wastefulness of a North American university town compared to the scarcity and thriftiness of a remote field site. Or there may be dissonance in the beauty and splendor of the physical environment of your field site compared to the starkness of returning to an academic institution. Further, it is important to understand that the time and space you needed while in the field is probably very different from what you will need upon return. Planning these realities into your schedule will result in a healthier re-entry and a more productive professional life.

4.2 | Action items for programs

4.2.1 | Pre-fieldwork: Work 'back again' training into the formal structure of the program pre-fieldwork

While many programs have integrated fieldwork preparation into coursework, such as including it as a part of research methods, re-entry is often ignored. Training would be improved with honest discussions by faculty

and recently returned students about their re-entry experiences. Sharing these experiences can be uncomfortable; however, it should be noted that not sharing can have detrimental effects on student wellbeing. Faculty advising fieldwork students should be encouraged to take special training courses on how to support these students and how to identify red flags. Students can also be matched with nonsupervising faculty or more senior students that can be a mentor and guide them in what to expect both in the field and upon return.

4.2.2 | Post-fieldwork: Expect a diversity of re-entry strategies and offer flexible timelines for meeting program benchmarks

For mentors, having an open and frank discussion with students throughout their fieldwork and re-entry process will enable you both to set realistic and healthy goals and strategies. This communication reduces the risk of students disappearing or becoming noncommunicative after completing their fieldwork and potentially slowing their progress in the program. Students and early professionals need to hear that planning for re-entry is as important as all of the other components of research and can help them be successful in their other goals. This can be facilitated through a field return orientation, where the next set of expected benchmarks can be explained to all returning students, and the relative flexibility of each of these benchmarks. During this time, departments should remind students of resources available to them upon return, from help finding housing to where to find mental health services. Programs should also normalize and encourage time off/vacation between field seasons and resuming academic activities. Given the different requirements and experiences of students, it is likely that there will be a need for flexibility. By introducing this flexibility as a norm, students will be better situated on an achievable path to success, one relevant and contextual to their own experience, rather than failing to meet generalized, but unrealistic, expectations.

4.2.3 | Post-fieldwork: Facilitate social gatherings, workshops, and provide resources for post-field cohorts/individuals with financial and infrastructure support from the program

In addition to improving the mental health of students, these events can help promote healthy ways forward after fieldwork. Departments should mark students' return in some way to ensure that students feel welcomed back and that they can reintegrate, such as through an email, or return party, or department story sharing. They can



structurally and financially facilitate formal dissertation writing groups as well as more casual social events (e.g., group meals or movie nights). In addition, departments can create materials like “so your friend/child/spouse returned from the field” pamphlets or infographics, to help support networks better understand the challenges of fieldwork and fieldwork return.

Some faculty and students may be resistant to these kinds of events and identify them as a waste of time or taking time from their writing (or more realistically their procrastination). This can be addressed through a normalization and celebration of these workshops and gatherings as an optional but important and highly encouraged part of the re-entry experience, while also emphasizing re-entry challenges as part of the fabric of academic life.

4.2.4 | Caveats: Privilege and a changing fieldwork landscape

As emphasized throughout, the process of returning differs for each individual. An intersectional approach is essential. An individual's entire academic experience, including their fieldwork, is critically shaped by factors such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, research funding, sexuality, parents' prior education, parental status, and generational wealth. While research has shown that anthropologists generally report a significant lack of family-career balance and high stress associated with the profession, this distinction can further be intensified by lower socioeconomic status and being a woman (Lynn et al., 2018). Further, in periods of global uncertainty and precarity, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, these inequities have only been further exacerbated (Gewin, 2021).

The re-entry experience in particular is heavily impacted by an individual's access to social and financial support. Having a closely engaged personal support unit that can understand what research travel entails and can absorb ongoing responsibilities at home, is not an experience shared by all. Yet, these factors significantly impact a field researcher's ability to let nonresearch concerns fade into the background. Many first-generation students have no framework upon which to base their experience of personally transformative academic work, or even extensive travel, abroad. Just as important, their personal support networks, such as their close family and friends, likely also have no framework to understand unique fieldwork experiences. Having a supportive (both behaviorally and financially) partner/spouse or even parents, a stable academic job, a self-set schedule, and childlessness/access to childcare provides flexibility others may not have. Through programmatic choices, institutions can help facilitate and bolster all students, but

particularly those that may require additional support. Diversity, equity, and inclusion are imperative for the success of biological anthropology as a field (Antón et al., 2018; Bolnick et al., 2019) and thus, programmatic structures recognizing these differences are requisite to help mitigate these inequities.

In addition, the research landscape is rapidly changing due to factors such as technological advances, increasing climate-related natural disasters, and global pandemics (Ocobock et al., 2021). What we understand as anthropological fieldwork is consequently changing. “Going to the field” may instead be (re)connecting with communities remotely online or relying heavily on local collaborators to collect the majority of the in-person data. Further, with greater access to online networking options, from messaging apps like WhatsApp to social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, the deep and active engagement with a community can persist in ways that even 50 years ago it could not. However, the sometimes-dramatic change in mindset between “fieldwork” and “field return” is likely to be consistent and normalizing this transition remains crucial.

Our aim here to share our stories of returning from the field and providing individual and programmatic suggestions to improve the return experience begins the conversation that we hope will continue. While the history of field-based academic research is long, it has often been built for individuals with considerable existing power and privilege, thus softening many of the negative effects of the return process. If there is to be more equitable access and flourishing of field-based science, it is required to at least acknowledge how difficult returning can be for everyone, since it likely impacts marginalized and vulnerable groups most. Embracing these perspectives and successfully implementing structural support will likely take time, however destigmatizing the struggle of return and setting those coming back up for success, will make for happier scholars and better scholarship. In the end, we must recognize that our work does not conclude with just going “there”, but in fact, is only starting when we come back again.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

MSS: Thanks to the incredible humans in Wyoming, Congo, Nubri, South Bend, and more that made my human biology work possible and to my amazing mentors Lee Gettler, Cara Ocobock, Jim McKenna, and Agustín Fuentes who have provided more support, feedback, and memes than anyone could have asked for. But the most thanks to my family, given and chosen, who rightfully see my work as a team sport, and in which they are critical team members. MSS is supported by a NIH

T-32 Postdoctoral National Research Service Award. SLL: Thanks to BaYaka participants who have made my return to the field such a joy; my supportive mentors, Michael E. Lamb, Adam H. Boyette, and Alyssa N. Crittenden; and my husband, Michael D. Vine. Funding for writing was provided to SLL by the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Postdoctoral Fellowship (Award no. 756-2019-0102). TEG: Thanks to the amazing Shuar participants and collaborators who taught me what a joy being in the field can be; to my incredible Shuar Health and Life History Project teammates whose support helps me go there and back again; and to my parents, siblings, and husband who have made coming back again easier. BCT: Special thanks to the Tsimane participants who welcomed me into their communities, and the international and interdisciplinary team members of the Tsimane Health and Life History Project who are my ever supportive mentors, collaborators, and friends. BCT is funded in part by NIH/NIA RF1 AG054442. MEH: Thanks to my Balinese and Samoan families who make fieldwork a pleasure; my advisors and professors who eased reentry especially Loran Cutsinger, Paul and Sally Shankman, Darna Dufour, Lene Pederson; my husband and dog James Loudon and Uli; and my patient and supportive family and friends especially Margie Robinson, and Richard Bender. AF Thanks his mother, Elizabeth Fuentes, and his advisor, Phyllis Dolhinow, for their insight, patience and compassion all those years ago enabling the transition back again, and all of the colleagues in the UC Berkeley Anthropology graduate program who helped make it my home again.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Mallika Sarma: Conceptualization (supporting); supervision (lead); visualization (lead); writing-original draft (lead); writing-review and editing (lead). **Theresa Gildner:** Writing-original draft (equal); writing-review and editing (equal). **Michaela Howells:** Writing-original draft (equal); writing-review and editing (equal). **Sheina Lew-Levy:** Visualization (supporting); writing-original draft (equal); writing-review and editing (equal). **Ben Trumble:** Writing-original draft (equal); writing-review and editing (equal). **Agustin Fuentes:** Conceptualization (lead); writing-original draft (equal); writing-review and editing (equal).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable—no new data generated, or the article describes entirely theoretical research.

ORCID

Mallika S. Sarma  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6693-9382>

Theresa E. Gildner  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7486-5208>

Michaela E. Howells  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2972-9554>

Sheina Lew-Levy  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1250-6418>

Benjamin C. Trumble  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3201-0628>

Agustin Fuentes  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0955-8214>

REFERENCES

- Antón, S. C., Malhi, R. S., & Fuentes, A. (2018). Race and diversity in U.S. biological anthropology: A decade of AAPA initiatives. *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, 165, 158–180. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajpa.23382>
- Bolnick, D. A., Smith, R. W. A., & Fuentes, A. (2019). How academic diversity is transforming scientific knowledge in biological anthropology. *American Anthropologist*, 121, 464. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.13212>
- Gewin, V. (2021). Pandemic burnout is rampant in academia. *Nature*, 591, 489–491. <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-021-00663-2>
- Hewlett, B. L. (2019). *The secret lives of anthropologists: Lessons from the field*. Routledge.
- Ice, G. H., Dufour, D. L., & Stevens, N. J. (2015). *Disasters in field research: Preparing for and coping with unexpected events*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Lieberman, D. (2014). *The story of the human body: Evolution, health, and disease*. Vintage.
- Lynn, C. D., Howells, M. H., & Stein, M. J. (2018). Family and the field: Expectations of a field-based research career affect researcher family planning decisions. *PLoS One*, 13(9), e0203500.
- MacClancy, J., & Fuentes, A. (Eds.). (2013). *Ethics in the field: Contemporary challenges* (Vol. 7). Berghahn Books.
- Ocobock, C. J., Lynn, C., Glass, D., & Niclou, A. (2021, Feb 15). Hackademics: Dissertation research in the time of COVID-19 (no. 114) [audio podcast episode]. In *Sausage of science*. Human Biology Association. <https://www.humbio.org/sos-114-hackademics-dissertation-research-in-the-time-of-covid-19/>.
- Rosaldo, R. (1994). Anthropology and 'the Field'. *Conference held at Stanford University and UC Santa Cruz*. February 18–19.
- Schnorr, S. L., Candela, M., Rampelli, S., Centanni, M., Consolandi, C., Basaglia, G., Turrone, S., Biagi, E., Peano, C., Severgnini, M., Fiori, J., Gotti, R., De Bellis, G., Luiselli, D., Brigidi, P., Mabulla, A., Marlowe, F., Henry, A. G., & Crittenden, A. N. (2014). Gut microbiome of the Hadza hunter-gatherers. *Nature Communications*, 5, 3654. <https://doi.org/10.1038/ncomms4654>

How to cite this article: Sarma, M. S., Gildner, T. E., Howells, M. E., Lew-Levy, S., Trumble, B. C., & Fuentes, A. (2021). There and back again: The biosocial dynamics of returning from the field. *American Journal of Human Biology*, e23673. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajhb.23673>