

## Shifting frontiers of ethnographic methodology

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### Abstract

This paper seeks mainly the methodological issues in keeping with the shifting empirical and theoretical paradigms in Anthropology. In addition, it explores various approaches and trends from other disciplines that have meaningfully influenced the course of anthropological research and thinking. The central themes and issues discussed in this paper include: multi-sited fieldwork, fieldwork at home (nativizing anthropology), reflexive methods, and post-modern ethnography (messy text), and issues of the fieldworker's position vis-à-vis informants.

In recent times, much has been written about the need for new and innovative fieldwork methods in anthropology since the reflexive turn of the discipline in the 1980s. As research interests of anthropologists have changed, so have the types of fieldwork that are being undertaken. New contexts for fieldwork and re-evaluation of old theoretical assumptions have widened the anthropological gaze. The ideal of long-term fieldwork in a rural location among 'non-Western' peoples still exerts a powerful influence on the discipline as the implicit norm for ethnographic fieldwork. A number of questions have been posed regarding 'ethnographers authority', 'crisis of representation', 'cultural translation', 'contextualisation of colonial rule' and so on. More specifically this paper examines the postmodern field research tradition in Anthropology.

### Introduction

This paper seeks to explore the methodological issues that are emerging in keeping with the shifting paradigm in anthropology. The central themes and issues discussed in this paper include "post-modern ethnography", "reflexivity", "ethnographic authority and representation", "text and cultural translation", and the "notion of fieldwork".

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### **Post-modern Ethnography: Reflexive and Rhetoric style**

Ethnography was previously conceived as a piece of exercise that has no clear problem, no methodology and no theoretical groundings. In post-modern context, anthropologists stress that ethnography is more than a qualitative and ethnographic narrations. The focus is now on that a good ethnographic studies must have an account of “cultural context” (Messey 1998), which balances interpretation of everyday details with wider social context.

However, in ethnography, as also in other disciplines, the notion “culture” is hard to define in very simplistic way; rather it carries more multi-faced meanings. In order to have a meaningful understanding of culture in ethnographic research one has to adopt a “magpie” attitude (Gold 1997). In post-modern ethnography for ‘magpie’ attitudes rather represent in the context of ‘juxtaposition’. This led the post-modernists to practice new form of ethnography-the experimental text or the messy text. The limitations of most ethnographic works are seen as lack of proper engagement in producing the text, which is now being criticised as a kind of “compressed ethnography” (Spindler and Spindler 1992). This shifting emphasis is now towards ensuring the ‘completeness’ through constant ‘engagement and re-engagement’.

### **Ethnographic Authority and Representation**

Recently ethnographic authority has been a key debated issue in anthropological literature. From methodological points of view, in describing a situation of social reality as far as authority is concerned, there can be two possible alternatives to provide a perspective namely: researcher’s authority or participant’s authority.

It is easily visible that researchers enjoy the highest authority in producing ethnographic text. In this context, it runs a danger of producing one-sided or monolithic accounts establishing

researcher's own authority on the text. When sole authority rests on researcher's hands, there is a risk of some parts of activities being eliminated or others obscured from the text. To overcome these limitations, ethnographers must challenge his/her theories, models and understanding. Therefore, researchers must accommodate 'local voices' as source of authority or authenticity. Because 'locals' are experiencing their culture in their way hence, their accounts are as important as that of researchers.

By so doing, researchers' power can be balanced to a great extent by allowing local perspectives to influence the researcher's accounts. The objective of ethnographic research is to discover the cultural knowledge that people hold in their minds, how it is employed in social interaction, and the consequences of this employment. The goal of ethnography is thus to combine the view of an insider with that of an outsider to describe a social setting. The resulting description is expected to be deeper and fuller than that of the ordinary outsider, and broader and less culture-bound than that of the ordinary insider. As Gold explains,

Rather than relying on a preconceived framework of gathering and analysing data, ethnographers use their interactions with their informants to discover and create analytical frameworks for understanding and portraying that what is under study. The procedures used in this direct and intimate acquaintance with the empirical world provide assurance that data collected and grounded in informant's actual experiences (Gold 1991).

These are both methodological and ethical implications of highlighting actor's voices. Building accounts of life as seen through the eyes of the actors themselves will almost always challenge existing images of them.



### Text as Cultural Translation

The researcher's interpretations or "cultural translation" is influenced by theories and modes of researchers, which are often extraneous to the cultural knowledge of 'locals' (natives). Talal Asad (1986) has keenly discussed about the problem of "cultural translation". According to him, "it is not possible to interpret or explain whole culture through ethnographic study, always a surplus of difference will remain". A liberal notion of culture conceived in Anglo-American anthropology that the translation of a culture is possible through breaking the structure of code and assimilating with theory and description. Postmodernists deny the notion of cultural translation itself. They argue that difference can never be consumed, conquered or experienced and thus any interpretive framework must remain partly unresolved.

However, style of ethnographic text writing is also an area of methodological development in post- modern anthropology. Ethnographies in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were largely seen as written in the plain style. Thus, modifications in 20<sup>th</sup> century ethnographic relationships were introduced in order to enhance ethnographer's ability to attract readers. Though earlier ones were still echoed in language of detachments, the new ethnographies encourage attachments between their texts and their readers by using narration.

Among rhetorical tactics used in ethnographic narratives today, one should give special emphasis to the "rhetoric of realism" (Hamersley and Atkinson 1995). It is argued that plain text aims to convince a reader about writer's power by demonstrating the writers' cold and economical detachments from the rich realities observed the rhetoric of realism. Ironically such inclusion of insignificant details in ethnography sometimes ends up being "antithetical to the plain style norm of writing" (Clifford 1986).

Thus, ethnographic research and writing as kind of human experiences, starts with ethnographers and their hosts, and so its quality should be assessed in terms of its impact on both 'host

and guest'. This ethnographic production can be seen as process of 'attachments or detachments' what James Clifford and Marcus describe as "the poetics and politics of ethnography" (1986).

Geertz (1973) attempted to steer anthropological scholarships away from a rigidly scientific model and toward a "humanistic, interpretative, hermeneutic model" apparently with great success. He suggests that anthropological text is not simply a matter of presenting a body of facts; it has much more to do with author's power of representation. All texts in social science are in one way or another "fictions" constructions and this need to treat them, as such, not as "inviolable, unassailable statements of scientific truth". Geertz believes "meaning is socially, historically and rhetorically constructed" (social construction of meaning). This approach certainly extends the wider cultural range of ethnographic inquiry beyond traditional anthropological scholarships. Anthropologists are constantly shaping and reshaping their methodologies in order to explore and understand more complex issues relating to their fieldwork experiences.

#### **Notion of 'fieldwork': Engagement and Re-engagement**

In recent times, much has been written about the need for new and innovative fieldwork methods in anthropology since the reflexive turn of the discipline in the 1980s. As research interests of anthropologists have changed, so have the types of fieldworks that are being undertaken. New contexts for fieldwork and re-evaluation of old theoretical assumptions have widened the anthropological gaze. The ideal of long-term fieldwork in a rural location among 'non-Western' peoples still exerts a powerful influence on the discipline as the implicit norm for ethnographic fieldworks.

While fieldwork remains the most significant *rite de passage* for anthropologists and one of the key identifiers of the discipline, there has been little discussion of how one goes about doing fieldwork in different kinds of fields and what epistemological implications for the discipline different kinds of fieldwork have.

While traditional methods such as long-term site work and participant observation are still valid, they now must complement other innovative methods that respond to contemporary epistemological challenges.

The fieldworkers may find themselves being objectified by their informants and may find their identity as a researcher challenged. In this context, researchers are facing new challenges that need to be addressed. The very notion of 'the field' itself may need critical questioning. Doing research in one's own country or society has been long-debated issue (Ellen 1984). Some of the questions raised in this debate apply to anthropological research whether: doing research 'at home' automatically allows a deeper understanding of the meaning people give to their environments, or whether the researcher is instead restricted by a failure to grasp the significance of what may appear obvious.

A most intriguing and contentious issue has been that of 'neutrality' as researcher, at least during fieldwork at home and while writing up the material. It is equally obvious that remaining relatively neutral is not necessarily in contrast with being a participant observer and adapting to the cultural model of behaviour specific to the people we study through various forms of interaction. However, striking the right balance between interaction and detachment can significantly influence our acceptance in the field and the level of trust our informants will have with us. Acceptance, particularly in case of researcher being a member of the dominant population, constitutes the major single issue to be dealt with.

Ethnographic research conducted in researchers own country is a central issue today and it is relevant to consider how the 'at home' issue has developed. What are the central methodological and ethical concerns that have emerged and why is research conducted 'at home, significant today? For example, medical anthropologists now seek to explore the issue of health and illness back home, and to the sphere of the home. Based on the



ethnographic experiences anthropologists are constantly picking up a number of themes that have carried particular salience such as the "methodological issues of medical anthropology conducted at home", "the concept of culture within psychiatry in an increasingly multi-ethnic societies", and "experiences of health and illness in quotidian settings" (Marc, L. 1994).

For long anthropology has contributed to the conceptualisation of culture from western perspectives particularly in the field of psychiatry. The western conception of mental health been confronted with the views of the people of the former colonies. Consequently this becomes the basis of many problems in mental health care for immigrants and ethnic groups in other parts of the world.

A new challenge is therefore how anthropology can contribute to the re-conceptualisation of culture in psychiatry? Recently, there are new methodological frontier emerging to tackle the medical power of definition; the issue of normality and abnormality; the questions of psycho tropes and use of medicines in solving life problems; the issue of control in society by psychiatry; mental hospitals and historical developments, but also psychiatry as a field to obtain knowledge about society.

### **Traveling Culture**

In other areas of anthropological scholarships have also similar kinds of methodological implications. Some of anthropology's founding ethnographic works were based on research into nomadic and/or transhumance populations. Studies of migration have also been of key significance within both social and biological branches of the discipline throughout much of the last 50 years. Today, however, work on movement is taking on new importance. Talk of nomadism, migration and pilgrimage has increasingly been augmented by discussions of the social, cultural and physical effects of globalization and the creation of Diaspora communities.

Researchers have adopted the term "traveling cultures" to describe the growing importance of mobility to the self-perceptions and ways of life of many populations (Bryman, A, 2001). This new thinking in anthropology in terms of its methodological development provides a unique perspective on population mobility in relation to the issues of health and other things. It brings together relevant social anthropological insights on embodiment, movement, diaspora and well being with demographic and biological approaches. In other words this integrates a range of approaches to look at how health is understood, managed and contested by different culture in both Western and non-Western countries. From methodological points of view, this new line of inquiry demands the adoption of multi-sited ethnography.

### Conclusion

Anthropology as a discipline is going through some significant shifts. It is no more the mere discovery of 'exotic culture', it now has to study the complex issues related to people's transnational movement. Therefore, the anthropological mode of inquiry is also shifting continuously. This article has been an attempt to explore some of these shifts.

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