

The Editors decided that it would be interesting to include some reflections on fieldwork from people actually in the field at the moment. We print below the first of these and hope that others will follow.

Dear Editors,

You have asked for a letter 'from the field' for Cambridge Anthropology, and the following is my attempt to oblige, and an effort to open a discussion on the nature of fieldwork which might be of use to people about to embark on it.

In the received wisdom of anthropology it is assumed that the subject is a 'science' and that fieldwork is its method. Yet even before coming to the Hebrides last year it appeared to me, as it does to many others, that this 'method' is so poorly defined that it can really only be described as an activity, encompassing many different methods such as description, survey, and various kinds of numerical measurements and estimates. There is also the problem, so frequently referred to, that fieldwork represents an initiation ritual which miraculously converts one into a 'real anthropologist'.

Having previously been through another professionalising ritual during three years of teachers training I have been struck by the similarities of the two situations. In both the instruction to the novice is of a strictly practical nature. For students before teaching practice there is advice on how to set out lesson plans, prepare work cards and visual aids and deal with smaller problems such as ensuring a constant supply of sharp pencils. For anthropologists there are language lessons, discussions of the use of questionnaires and surveys, and advice about cameras and computers. However among both sets of students there seems to be a similar sense of frustration and this conceals two critical unanswered questions. The first concerns the psychological problem of how to cope with a new role in a crucial career situation. The second is more fundamental, and concerns the actual nature of the activity - what is the process of teaching and learning, or what does it mean to be an anthropologist.

I managed to survive teaching practice, and am now about to return from a year's fieldwork, but I have to admit that survival in both situations has been a matter of constant adaptation rather than arriving at clear theoretical solutions.

Once having settled the logistical problems of deciding on a location and physically getting there, the immediacy of these two questions became apparent. However well prepared I thought myself in Cambridge the reality

of living in a strange environment among people whom I was bound by my role to regard as objects almost froze my ability to make the relationships necessary to the work. Many times I was reminded of a friend who once confided that he spent his first month putting up shelves in his hut, and that when he finally ventured forth to the village he could not formulate questions to the inhabitants but substituted the activity of measuring their homes. It is not a problem which diminishes with time. I have found that there were many days when I would not be able to collect data, preferring to be bureaucratic about that already collected, or using a cold as an excuse to sit by the fire and read. My consolations are that it is clear from Malinowski's Diary that he often spent whole days reading Thackeray in the Trobriands, and assurances in letters from other anthropologists that they had found this same tendency to procrastinate. It seems rather sad that this sort of problem is not aired more openly within the discipline.

It is when faced with this isolation that the philosophical question becomes paramount. One wonders what one is doing in this ridiculous position, and what possible purpose one's data collection can serve. The easy answer, and occasionally the only one which seems plausible, is that one is working for a Ph.D. Another, which frequently appeals to the human objects of my activity, is that the data will preserve in some way a disappearing world. But besides begging questions about the relationship between data and reality, and the nature of change, I should have thought that such rescue ethnography was the province of archivists and 'oral' historians, not anthropologists.

If anthropology is to be regarded as science as in the received wisdom then I suppose I could see myself as an objective scientist. Yet surely one must reject the notion of a 'science of man' which gives information about human universals, human nature or mankind, as being part of an idealist philosophy. It is possibly better to start from a Durkheimian formulation of 'social facts' but this can lead to a reliance upon dubious statistical methods, and 'explanations' of social behaviour which return to a similar idealist position. Surely too one must reject as implausible the notion of entering into other peoples' symbolic worlds. Nor do I believe, as I heard an archaeologist say at a recent conference, that one should concentrate on collecting facts and the theory will come out later. Facts do not just lie around the world waiting to be collected, and even if they did what facts are relevant to anthropology, and how do I recognise them when I see them?

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I have found my own solution in the notion that all the data I collect, my own fieldnotes and the many other types of information available for Lewis, are a form of representation of the social life which I am investigating. The purpose of my investigation seems to me to be to produce knowledge of the current situation in one part of the world economy. This I was clear about before I came here, but it did not entirely solve many of the day to day difficulties which were as much of a philosophical as of a practical nature. I think it is time that such fundamental issues were as common a currency of anthropological discussion as kin links and reciprocal exchange. In other words I should like to hear how other people solve the problems raised by fieldwork when considered as methodology.

Sincerely yours,

Judith Ennew

North Tolsta
Isle of Lewis,
Scotland

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