

Fieldwork

Why read this text...

Fieldwork is the basis of anthropological work and disciplinary efforts. In anthropology, the field represents a site, a method and a location (Gupta and Ferguson 1997 in Sluka & Robbenn 2012). This text will help you understand the different meanings the concept of fieldwork has for anthropologists. Perhaps the simplest way to explain fieldwork is to say that it happens anywhere where humans are present by their actions. Educational anthropologists may conduct fieldwork to explore what it is like to be a student, the social dynamics of classroom life, teacher discourses, the inherent learning in everyday school routines, and more. This text will expand your knowledge of what fieldwork entails, and help you think about how you might supplement your work as a teacher with various forms of ethnographic fieldwork. It is recommended that you read about this concept in combination with other concepts, for example, world-making and the ethnographic gaze.

Historical Context

To gain insight into shifting anthropological notions of fieldwork, we return to the beginning of anthropological research. At the end of the 19th century, most anthropologists were so-called “armchair scientists,” who, like many other scholars of that period, wrote scientific papers from their libraries. In anthropology, these were based on accounts gathered from missionaries, colonial government officials, traders, and other observant travellers. Many early anthropologists who travelled abroad on expeditions conducted what is called “anthropology from the porch,” observing from a distance, without directly participating in daily life and events.

Two early 20th century anthropologists, Bronislaw Malinowski and Franz Boas both argued that anthropologists had to come into direct, long-term contact with the communities they were exploring, to learn their language and to observe and document cultural phenomena as they unfolded. Their fieldwork among Trobriand Islanders in the South Pacific and Native Americans on USA Northwest coast marked a new way of working ethnographically that still resonates in present-day anthropology.

Bronislaw Malinowski is considered the ‘father’ of long-term fieldwork entailing participant observation, an ethnographic field technique still used in anthropology today. B. Malinowski established participant observation as a central field technique. This kind of fieldwork entails a lengthy stay in a particular place, a ‘field’, close and even personal connections with a particular group of people to learn more about their way of life. Living near and sharing daily life with one’s interlocutors allows an anthropologist to experience their world, and how the co-dependence of the natural and cultural environment. Notetaking as a central method of ethnographic fieldwork continues to be an indispensable part of the fieldwork for anthropologists.

From anthropology’s beginnings as a discipline in the late 19th century to contemporary anthropology, the idea and places of fieldwork have greatly changed. For example, anthropologists no longer limit their fieldwork to remote, non-industrial communities, but increasingly focus on all kinds of people in urban contexts. The ‘field’ is not necessarily

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connected with a particular locality, as the field is constructed around a chosen theme, topic or problem. George Marcus (1995) has called this approach multi-sited ethnography. New technologies also remove barriers of time and distance between anthropologists and their fields such that current field research is no limited by 'being there' or by being together at the same times. Anthropologists still go to 'the field' to carry out fieldwork, but what mixtures of 'armchair,' 'from the porch' or intensive immersive fieldwork this entails has greatly changed.

a) Discussion

Anthropologists employ a wide range of ethnographic field techniques. But first they have to get themselves to the field, get to know 'the locals', inform them of their research aims and gain access. Field methodology includes non-formal conversations, small talk and hanging out, interviews, participant observation, mapping, and surveying, keeping field notes and personal diaries and drawing up kinship or network diagrams. The wide range of data thus produced allows for "thick description" (Geertz 1973), and in a form of dense description helps readers 'see' and better understand the individuals, communities and the cultural practices observed. One feature of anthropological work is the length of time spent 'in the field'. Stints of fieldwork vary from a few weeks to several years of living and working with people, sharing as much as possible of their everyday life.

Before going to the field, the anthropologist must make a detailed research plan. This is a very intense and creative process, involving defining the subject of the research, planning different phases of the research process, initiating contact, and reflecting on methodology. It should be emphasized that to change set topics, research focus and plans along the way is part of any field experience, as fieldwork also entails adapting to what one encounters in the field. As such, work done in the field is more than just 'data gathering', it is learning by doing and analyzing as one goes. The anthropologist must be aware that s/he cannot make a detailed program for fieldwork and expect everything to fall into place (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007).

The aim of the fieldwork is to write a detailed, descriptive, and analytical ethnography of a community, the daily life of group of people, of particular phenomena or events, etc. Anthropologists endeavour to present a way of life in ways that make the unknown familiar or the familiar unusual. Ethnography is inherently comparative and good ethnography allows people to learn about other cultures while also learning to understand aspects of their own culture in different ways.

Fieldwork is an integral part of anthropological knowledge-making. Working in the field involves new ways of knowing, being and doing through ethnographic encounters. Ethnographic encounter implies the cooperation between the ethnographer and research participants, according to Sluka and Robben, the new ethnography entails that it is never enough to just go to the field, move away from your own everyday life, observe, converse and question, and make a detailed ethnographic account. Fieldwork is not designed for a go-and-go model (Hamilton 2009), nor is it limited to the spontaneous accumulation of knowledge that "happens" if we approach the field as a new and different experience. Fieldwork always includes thorough preparation, in-depth reading of methodological,



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theoretical, and ethnographic literature as well as selecting field techniques and methodological strategies (Potkonjak 2014).

Doing fieldwork is sometimes seen as a lived relational, bodily, and psychological process, occurring as much “on the outside as on the inside” of the anthropologist and between the anthropologist and his research participants, peers, professors, and others (Spencer 2011). Fieldwork in anthropology is emotionally imaginative as well as experienced for the both the anthropologist as his interlocutors (Hage 2010, Svašek 2010). We can conclude with the notion that fieldwork provides anthropologists with first-hand experiences of local places and ways of life, how people speak about and make sense of what is going on, and helps us understand the unfamiliar about the Other (Hastrup 1995).

b) Practical example

Anthropologists have long studied local forms of infant care, child-rearing, and initiation rites. Educational anthropology was established in the USA in the 1950s, but remained a marginal subfield of anthropology for several decades. First in the 1980s a larger number of anthropologists turned their attention to educational settings and doing fieldwork in schools. According to Delamont and Atkinson, ethnographies in education are best described as “research on and in educational institutions based on participant observation and/or permanent recordings of everyday life in naturally occurring settings” (1995:15). In that sense, any school ethnographer can find himself in a difficult undertaking of making familiar, everyday classroom situations strange, or unfamiliar (Delamont and Atkinson, 1995; Spindler and Spindler, 1982).

Capturing of the social context of learning a quantitative approach, including ethnographic and participant observation, as well as writing detailed field notes, were developed by educational anthropologists. New initiatives were considered in British primary schools in order to understand teaching styles and the impact of teachers to the learning process. Project “Observational Research and Classroom Learning Evaluation - ORACLE” (1975-1980), was launched at the University of Leicester School of Education. The project brought an ethnographic insight into classroom processes, in which researchers focused on teaching and learning, while other similar projects focused more on teachers and teaching (Gordon et al. 2007).

Another example points to an important publication that provides an insight on how to do fieldwork in educational anthropology, prepared by Sara Delamont in the book “Fieldwork in Educational Settings. Methods, pitfalls and perspectives” (2002) unite and take the best of sociological and anthropological methodology. The greatest value of the book are the examples from practice, which can inspire the reader to create his own path when engaging into fieldwork.

Thinking further:

- In which part of your work could doing fieldwork with you students introduce new ways of learning to your class?
- Assign a local or regional ethnography that addresses everyday life in general or focuses on a specific topic. Discuss with students what ethnography could say about



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the life in the local area. Ask students to juxtapose data provided in the local ethnography with macrolevel events and issues.

KEY-WORDS/ CROSS-REFERENCES

Empirical research, methodology, ethnography, ethnographic gaze

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Authors: Danijela Birt Katić, Jelena Kupsjak (Croatia)



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