

Ethnography

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The Motivation

Qualitative method that aims to open up and extend understandings of how human beings live in the world.

Does this by engaging people on their own terms in a relatively undirected way.

A disciplined preoccupation with social imaginaries – with values, ideas and practices that have become thinkable, plausible, self-evident.

A counter-point to metrics

Ethnography ...

Relational – knowing through engagement – learning ‘from’ no simply ‘about’.

Requires an ability to unlearn and to not know – methodological ignorance

But empirically motivated – learning from engagement over time

Slow - patience

A navigational skill

A theoretical practice

Ethnography as Theoretical Practice

Non-metric abstraction:

Attempts to clarify how existing ways of thinking (and acting) are reproduced – in relation to specific situations – including how ‘change’ is recognised.

To enquire into the spaces in which people make up their minds – insisting that making up your mind is always a relational process and not the autonomous choice of an individual.

To show that things might be otherwise than had previously been assumed, and to bring new questions to the table.

Historical Origins

Early 20th century - study of human diversity – other ways of being human – critique of modernist assumptions.

Participation – building relations

Minute and systematic observation

Focus on collective practices – ritual, myth, kinship, production and exchange, political structures – and the interconnections between these.

A mode of collection – language, image, artefacts

The Crisis of Representation



The Problem

- Local cultures under threat:
modernity/tradition
- Cultures/sub-groups as islands:
homogeneous, singular
- Anthropological accounts subjective
- Anthropological accounts collusive
- Culture as difference – primitive, exotic,
elsewhere

What is Ethnography?

- What...
- Where...
- Who...
- When...
- How...
- Why...

WHAT?



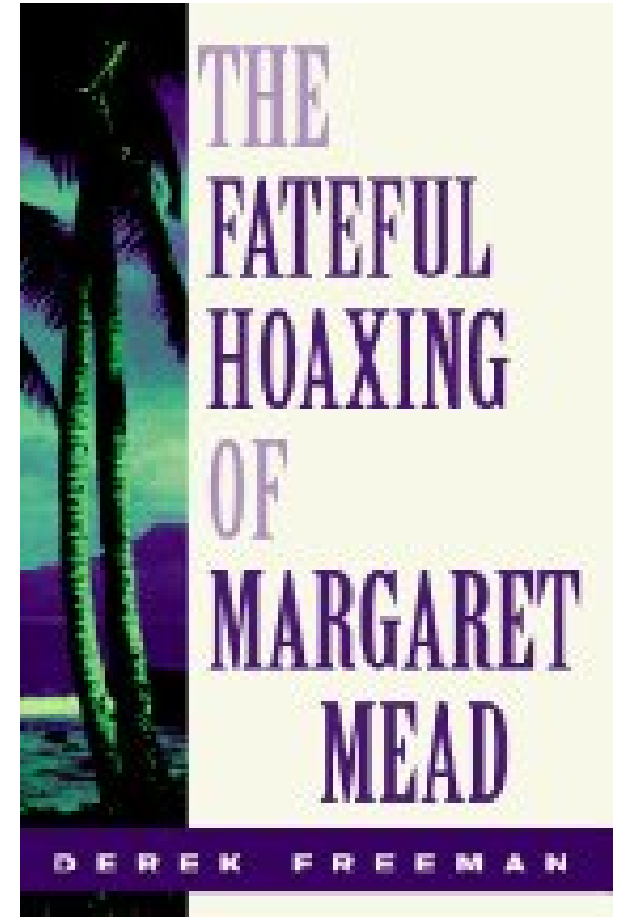
WHERE?



What is the Local Scale?



Who?



WHEN?



How?

Classical Ethnography

Anthropologist travels to
another culture –
place, culture,
subjects awaiting
discovery and
description

Thick description



Contemporary Ethnography

Anthropologist as navigator, on a journey, finding her way in a world which is also on the move.



Participation,
Learning, Recording,
Writing

What kinds of understanding does ethnography offer

It can help to give new perspectives on how problems are approached, how questions are posed allows new things / relations to come into play

Allows unauthorised connections to be made

“A nomadic approach in a world of fortified hill towns” - Westbrook

Examples of ethnographic research in Manchester

Anthropology Department in Manchester –
huge range of projects from all over the
world – all committed to ethnographic
methods of the kinds outlined above – all
have web presence.

www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/disciplines/socialanthropology/about/staff/

Things to Read

Westbrook, David. 2008. *Navigators of the Contemporary: Why Ethnography Matters*. The University of Chicago Press.

Cerwonka, Allaine and Liisa Malkki. 2007. *Improvising Theory: Process and Temporality in Ethnographic Fieldwork*. University of Chicago Press.

Robben, Antonius. 2007. *Ethnographic Fieldwork: An Anthropological Reader*. Blackwell.

Blogs

ASA Globalog

Open Anthropology

Savage Minds

Anthropology.net