

**COURSEWORK COVER SHEET**

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In this blog I will be reflecting on Ben Gidley’s lecture on ethnography, where he traced the history of key developments in the field of ethnographic practice and shared insights from his own research that demonstrated some of the distinctive knowledge that can be produced using this qualitative research method.

Gidley began by outlining four key principles or features that distinguish ethnographic approaches - immersion, the notion of the ‘field’ as a site of study, making the familiar strange/the strange familiar, and inscriptional practices. Through immersion, the researcher is able to strain towards what is known as the ‘emic’ view - a view from the inside. This immersion involves both proximity to the subject of study and duration - traditionally ethnography takes place over several months or even years, although Gidley highlighted how the duration of ethnographic study has become more varied as the practice has been popularised outside the field of anthropology. The principle of immersion is only possible when one is able to define the particular place within which the immersion will take place, known as the ‘field’ of research. The notion of making the familiar strange and the strange familiar reflects the relationship between both proximity and detachment that characterises ethnography. And finally, the notion of inscription indicates that essential to ethnography is not only observation, but a ‘thick’ description of the reality one is seeking to understand.

For Gidley, any survey of ethnographic methods must reckon with the ways in which ethnography emerged from within colonial contexts and are therefore entangled with colonial and racist thinking. He highlighted the influential work of anthropologist Malinowski on life in the western pacific, who quickly came to represent the idealised model of an ethnographer - white, lone and heroic. Yet his research was only made possible through the social relations of colonialism, a truth that anthropologists have been forced to reckon with.

In the 1920s the Chicago School of Sociology took up the methods that were being developed by anthropologists in places of new colonial encounter and brought them into the city, both reinforcing and also challenging colonial ways of thinking. Here the field of study became Chicago, and a new generation of ethnographers studied the social problems of inter-ethnic conflict, crime and delinquency in the city, seeking to understand the urban environment as an ecology (see for example Park, Burgess and McKenzie, 1925).

While anthropologists and sociologists using these tools tended to present themselves as rational, emotionally detached and neutral observers, Gidley described a paradigm shift or ‘reflexive turn’ among ethnographers in the 1980s, marked by the foregrounding of the researcher’s subjectivity. The publishing of Malinowski’s diaries in the late 1960s, which exposed his racialised fantasies and resentment towards those he studied, played an important role in fuelling this shift away from distancing and dispassionate approaches rooted in the myth of the objective observer.

Ruth Behar’s work is emblematic of such an approach and has had a profound impact on ethnographic practice. In The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart (1996) she argues for bringing emotion and experience into the foreground of ethnographic research to make it more meaningful.

Gidley highlighted another important development in anthropology in the 1990s emerging from a growing concern that, in taking an up-close view of people’s lives and behaviours, ethnographers were failing to situate what they were seeing within the wider social relations that shaped them. As such, they risked producing research that could not situate responsibility for social problems beyond the individual or local level. Rather than taking a fixed geographic area as the field of study, ethnographers explored the possibility of ‘following’ the subject through wider social relations to take in this context as part of the object of study.

Ethnographic approaches to research have been widely taken up in the effort to gain deeper understandings of social phenomena and of people’s everyday lives. Often researchers will combine participant observation - a primary tool of ethnographers - with other tools such as interviews or focus groups to generate complex insights into people’s behaviours and beliefs. Gidley shared an example of his research which highlighted the unique strengths of combining participant observation with other qualitative methods. His 2001 research looking into intergroup relations in Camberwell and Bermondsey involved key informant interviews, group interviews, as well as ‘a lot of hanging out’. While in many of the interviews with white people living in camberwell described how they loved living in a multicultural community, the ethnographic findings seemed to confirm other interviews where people expressed that in reality there was a tendency communities to “live parallel lives''.

My research is concerned with understanding the complex dynamics of social movements in the UK, and as such, ethnographic methods could prove incredibly valuable. Indeed, social movement theorists have regularly used ethnography to understand how social movements and social movement organisations function, including highlighting important limitations and contradictions that activists may be less motivated to identify or address (Cox et al, 2O24). However, as social movement research Arribas Lozano emphasises, the ethics of carrying out ethnographic work within movements focussed on transforming from below the social relations of those who are most marginalised are very complex (2O18). Moreover, social movements themselves produce their own knowledge through cycles of action and reflection, and Gidley argues for the importance in ethnography in  valuing the understandings that practitioners develop through their everyday work, which could even be understood as ‘ethnographic sensibilities’ (2019).

In a research field with such messy social relations of power, and where researchers have frequently been accused of extracting knowledge from their research subjects, drawing on ethnographic approaches that trouble the subject-object research relationship would be essential. Possible avenues include drawing insights from the emerging field of collaborative anthropology. For ethnograher Joanne Rappaport (2O16), who draws on columbian traditions of collaborative anthropology informed by Fals Borda, this requires full involvement of social movement actors at every stage of the research, from its inception through to research outputs, which should be fully oriented towards enriching the learning and practice of social movement organisations. For me, the discussion of collaboration in relation to ethnographic approaches raises challenging questions in relation to the importance of both detachment and proximity that Gidley raised at the beginning of his lecture. For example, how might a group of participants think about, or develop a practice of ‘detachment’ as participant-observers researching their own organisation or movement? This seems to be a question that collaborative autoethnographers might be well placed to contribute to (see for example Chang, 2O12) where the researchers themselves become the object of ethnographic study through critical analysis of self-data.

Chang, H. et al. (2O12) Collaborative Autoethnography, Taylor & Francis Group

Rappaport, Joanne (2O16) "Rethinking the Meaning of Research in Collaborative Relationships." *Collaborative Anthropologies*, vol. 9 no. 1, p. 1-31. *Project MUSE*

Cox, L. et al (2O24 *How can we research social movements? An introduction* in Cox et al, Handbook of Research Methods and Applications for Social Movements, Edward Elgar

Arribas Lozano, A. (2018). Knowledge co-production with social movement networks. Redefining grassroots politics, rethinking research. *Social Movement Studies*, *17*(4), 451–463.