

# Reading and Doing Ethnography

Social Anthropology 314

# 3.1 Intimacy in Fieldwork

It's not really ethnography without  
some sort of closeness with  
somebody.

Ethnography feels a little off when  
it's only impersonal or public.

But ethnography also feels a little  
off when it's done well.

Instrumentalism and intimacy are frequently at odds.

Must you only ask direct, serious  
questions?

# Daydream, reverie

Let's all daydream for a few minutes and write down  
what we come up with.

Must you sympathize  
with your informants?



What if your informant seems to  
make things up?

# Strategy 1: Playing Along

*Abigail went to her doctor, who suspected she might be suffering from MS... Suddenly her old sleep disorders, her inability to hold a job for more than a few months, her inability to cope with life, were given a sound medical explanation. And this medical explanation erased the need to examine all the less savoury aspects of her life, such as a childhood in poverty; childhood sexual abuse; a history of school failure; living with the fear that someone would discover that the credentials she listed on her resume were falsified; her complete disdain for authority; and her quick temper... **MS was a godsend. Abigail told me it was a relief to know she was really, really sick and not insane. And I agreed. I found myself in the ridiculous position of wishing my friend ill health.** (Young 210)*

# Withholding judgment

*I have made a deliberate attempt to achieve a degree of respectful detachment, to be sensitive to contradictory and contentious takes on the subject of truth so as not to succumb to absolute certainties that would diminish the experiences of some while elevating those of others. I try not to take sides and to withhold judgement, for I firmly believe we all make our realities out of language and are subject to its whims and fancy. (205)*

# Partial knowledge

*Perhaps the thing I value most about participant observation is its unerring ability to undermine the elegant simplicities of our theories. Participant observation forces us to confront the limits of our knowledge and understanding. The knowledge we produce tends to be tentative, and occasionally, at least to friends, we admit to self-doubt about the deceptions, collusion, and complicity that become an aspect of our ethnographic endeavours, despite our efforts to be forthright and ethical. This is inevitable because our very presence contaminates the field, muddies the waters. **We go where we don't belong.** (208)*

# Strategy 2: Expressing alarm

*In the early evening, I join Majid in his shop in the souk. We gather his nephews together and walk to a new restaurant in an old villa that has been renovated on the edge of the souk. Actually, I very much enjoy the nephews, but more so one-on-one than as a group, when their behavior is ritualized and inevitably directed toward each other. All of them got new cell phones in the last year, and one shares with me the video clips he has downloaded onto his. His latest find is of a woman wearing high heels stomping on the genitals of a naked man lying on his stomach. “Aaayyy,” I say, “**please keep it for yourself. It pains me just to watch.**” He chuckles and pushes another, similar clip in my face. I ask him if he identifies with the man or the woman in the video. He simply laughs. (Borneman 237)*

# Borneman's interpretation

*That Mohammed did not respond when I asked him with whom he identified on the video, the female sadist or her male victim, suggests an emotional ambivalence. Mohammed probably identified with the entire situation and its ambiguity. On the one hand, he probably empathized strongly with the male victim... From this basically passive (complacent) position, Mohammed probably empathized with the man getting his balls stepped on by a sexy lady.*

*On the other hand, knowing that his language is filled with obscene foreign words and that his humor tends toward the lewd and risqué, I suspect he found the aggression of the castrating woman funny and titillating. (238)*

# Borneman's interpretation

*The high-heeled video-woman was admittedly going to extremes to get attention, inverting the usual male-female romantic hierarchy by playing the active role. The point is, however, that she was punishing the man in the video. Although Mohammed thinks this punishment plausible if not also pleasurable and deserved, it also expresses his ambivalence toward women. In this way, Mohammed's phantasies become social transgressions that construe women's sadistic power over him as pleasurable. (239)*

# Dimensions of intimacy

- >> Affective/emotional ("feeling close to people," empathy)
- >> Interpretive/intersubjective ("sharing consciousness")
- >> Moral (shared values or ideological commitments)
- >> Corporeal (spatial proximity, physical touch)
- >> Sociological (shared status or classification)
- >> Cultural (shared universe of symbols)



Intersubjectivity

# Intersubjectivity

*A relationship of mutual recognition—a relation in which each person experiences the other as a “like subject,” another mind who can be “felt with,” yet has a distinct, separate center of feeling and perception.*

**— Jessica Benjamin, "Beyond Doer and Done to" (5)**

*You are doubtless like myself, you all  
have the same terrifying and tedious  
depth.*

— Gustave Flaubert in Jean-Paul Sartre, "Itinerary of a  
Thought"

# Intersubjectivity is limited

*To understand the non-explicit features of action, the habitual or the covert, requires an epistemology of intimacy—but to take them as anything other than obvious, natural, self-contained, and unshakeable requires an epistemology of estrangement.*

**— Webb Keane, "Self-interpretation" (240)**

# Transference

When you direct your feelings towards someone onto a substitute.

For instance: You are angry at your father, you redirect this towards your therapist.

*Counter-transference*: The therapist redirects their feelings onto you.

# Questions

- >> When immersing yourself into the field, and befriending characters within this field, how do know when your new companion is telling the absolute truth about his/her life, as **truthful information is needed when writing an ethnographic piece, as without it, surely the piece becomes invalid**? Is befriending an important character in your fieldwork and trusting them, allowed as an anthropologist?
- >> Why did Borneman base his research on young Syrian men instead of women?
- >> Is it possible to be both an ethnographer and a friends to the same group of people? Does it not effect one's observations?

# Questions

- >> The concept of doing ethnographer through a "story teller's" lens, is this allowed within our work?
- >> In the case of day dreaming that happens consciously that is influenced by the anthropologist or ethnographer, does that not render the research or results inconclusive?
- >> With regards to Borneman where does psychoanalysis stop and anthropological observation start or are the two completely interlinked?

