

The Way I Saw Ethnography

TANNITH MATTHEW



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 2.5 UK: Scotland License | © Tannith Matthew. ISSN 2050-778X (Online). DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2218/unfamiliar.v6i1.1507>

The Way I Saw Ethnography

TANNITH MATTHEW

I stood in the corner of a barely-lit room filled with old fashioned toys, trying to slow down my breathing and build up the courage to move out of the shadows. I knew that I was going to have to talk to somebody at some point or I was never going to find something interesting to write about.

I was in the Museum of Childhood, located along the Royal Mile in Edinburgh, making my first attempt at doing fieldwork for my ethnography course. Sitting in a lecture hall for the past year and a half ethnography had seemed such a simple methodology and way of research, and I had naïvely believed that it would be easy to do what the big names in anthropology were doing. Since completing my group project for the Ethnography course, however, I have learned a lot about what it really means to do ethnographic research, and how difficult it can sometimes be. I have also learnt a lot about myself: how I work in a group; how I look at and respond to things I see; and how I reflect on past experiences.

The process of doing fieldwork turned out to be extremely challenging but also very rewarding. My main obstacle was my anxiety. The first difficulty I had was simply going to the museum in order to start my fieldwork. Although I had been to the museum a lot as a child - having taken many trips to Edinburgh with my mother - and knew the layout well, I felt very unsure of going alone in order to observe people. It took me a week longer than the other people in my group to begin research because of the time it took me to gain the courage to start. Once I started going to the museum I spent most of my time trying to blend into the shadows while watching what happened around me and making field notes from what I observed. I never stayed for long because I often found the process of observing people both overwhelming and exhausting. My awkwardness probably came across to those that I interviewed and most of the time the people I spoke to would do a lot of the talking for me because they could tell I was uncomfortable. While guided by my questions, then, they were not limited by them, they also became leaders of their own explorations. I believe that my initial awkwardness in the role of researcher, as well as my informants' response to this, allowed me to learn some really interesting things from them. My anxiousness also led me to be more aware of my surroundings and my position within them, which meant that I was able to reflect on my own role and its effects on what was being said and what I saw.

Working within a group to do this project ended up more of a blessing than I could have anticipated. My initial reaction to finding out we would be working in groups was to complain about it alongside all the other students stuck doing group projects this semester. Having Emily Dawson and Isla Whateley (my project partners) studying the same space that I was looking at, however, allowed for a much clearer insight into what we were seeing and allowed me to look at myself and the data I gathered more closely. Each of us saw things slightly differently and reflected on things in a different way from our own individual perspectives. In the end this allowed for more interesting concepts to emerge from within our combined research. We ended up looking at the way in which people who visited the museum looked back on their own childhood and the idea of nostalgia. One of the things we found was that people tended to look back on their childhood positively if they related to any of the exhibits in the museum, something that also often made them think of other types of childhoods as bad, or not as good as theirs had been. Looking at how people were remembering things from the past made me think about how I was remembering the things that I saw, and how I was reporting them to the other members of my group. It made me more aware of how I was viewing things and whether I was remembering and viewing things truthfully.

Doing this ethnography course has given me a unique opportunity to immerse myself in what anthropology is really about and why we do it. It has allowed me to see how working in a group can sometimes be more beneficial than working alone, and it has given me skills which I will no doubt need in the future. It has also shown me how I can use my anxiety as an advantage in certain situations, and it has allowed me the opportunity of understanding myself better as an individual. I have come away from this project feeling that I have learned

something about humanity, something about myself and something about doing research and I'm left inspired and excited about what else I can learn. Anything which fosters a good amount of curiosity and questioning of one's own mind, like this course has for me, can only be a positive thing moving into further years of study.