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Producing Truth?

Some Reflections on Ethnographic Research

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## **Producing Truth?**

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#### **Abstract**

An extract of fieldnotes is presented from the first ethnographic research I participated in: a transect walk with Mormon missionaries on Middle Meadow Walk. In this short reflection, I look at some of the issues that arose when applying knowledge from books and lectures to real-life interactions with human beings during research. In particular, issues around the self in the field are discussed, and some further questions concerning the nature of anthropological interpretation raised.

**Keywords:** Reflexivity, the self in the field, religion, decolonisation.

#### **Transect walk with Elder Jacobs and Elder Mac (pseudonyms)**

**6<sup>th</sup> Feb 2019**

#### **Early afternoon**

The weather was deceptively spring-like, save for the occasional gust of cold wind reminding us that winter is not over just yet. We meet the Missionaries outside the Library Café, both are well-dressed with shiny black name tags attached to their coat. As it turns out they have just finished an interview with another group doing a similar project, and I feel a stinging sense of guilt. Elder Jacobs, however, assures us that it's alright – 'after all', he says, 'we pester people all the time'. [...] Elder Mac comments that the Meadows would be good for our purposes (I assume they knew that the focus of our project was the Meadows).

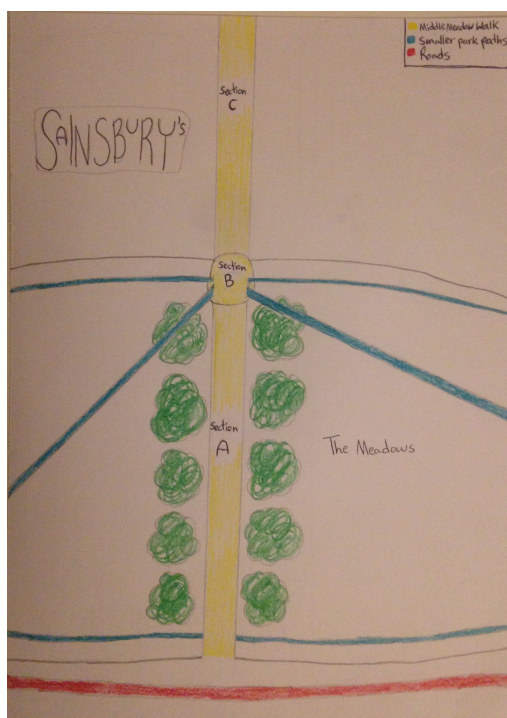


Figure 1 Simple map of Middle Meadow Walk showing a division of the space into three sections: A, B, and C, from the bottom up. Drawn by Rachel Runesson.

As we walk along one of the smaller paths towards Section B (see Fig. 1), Elder Mac suddenly turns away from the group, and asks a woman what music she was listening to. She did not remove her earphones and looked down at her phone defensively, perhaps trying to avoid having a conversation with the Missionaries. Elder Jacobs keeps walking and talking, and I am unsure about how we should proceed. Should one of us stop and stay with Elder Mac? If so, should we keep our distance while he talks, or walk up and be clearly *in* the conversation? The energetic Elder Jacobs is still telling us about his home, and so both of us keep walking with him. We have now reached the busy Section B, where all paths in this area cross. Elder Jacobs seems a little unsure of how he should act. He asks one person how their day was, but they continue right past without even raising their eyes.

We stand for a time centrally in Section B. I would have thought we were in the way, but there is plenty of space and no one seems bothered by us. Elder Mac joins us and we ask a few questions. There are a fair number of people walking by, but the Missionaries say it's not exceptional. We ask why they always walk in twos, and Elder Jacobs surprises me by asking if we want the 'Biblical' or the 'real' answer. Surely they must consider the Biblical to be part of reality? He proceeds to give us both: The first is that the testimony of two is better than that of one, and the second is that it is safer in twos. We ask what dangers they encounter and they tell us it is not unusual to be punched, even in midday in seemingly safe areas. They also ask us how we respond to missionaries, and I answer that I have my own religion (I'm a Lutheran), but that I always enjoy a discussion. All of us seem uncertain of how to continue this talk, but in the end both Missionaries start talking to people close by, while my group member and I stand to the side and observe. It feels odd standing there, watching them and writing in my book. I feel intrusive, if only because the people they approach do not know who we are or even that we are watching them. We are still in Section B. I am standing closest to Elder Jacobs

and can hear parts of the heated conversation he is having with a man about the existence of God. Though they stand in the middle of a path, just at the edge of Section B, the walk is wide and people have no trouble walking around them. When he finishes he comes over to us and talks about how people often attack their religion, despite the Missionaries never pushing their views. I respond with understanding, and explain that I sometimes have to deal with aggressive people who become upset about religion. Both talk to a few more people, but most either walk by with blank stares straight ahead, or with a word about some appointment. I ask Elder Jacobs if they usually stay in one area for this long, and he says that no, they usually walk around more. He also comments that he usually jokes more, but he's nervous with people watching.

## **Reflection**

I had read about fieldwork, attended lectures about fieldwork, and discussed fieldwork: in theory, everything was crystal clear and I thought I was ready. Yet there I was, fumbling to participate in observation (or was it observing in participation?), 'hang out' (but 'deeply'), and blend in seamlessly with the Missionaries, not disturbing their work. It is not strange, perhaps, that my group member and I had a strong sense of uncertainty delving into our first ever fieldwork experience. Of course, I had learned about the challenges of fieldwork as well, the need for reflexivity and the inevitability of influencing the situation around you. However, nothing brought all this to such a degree of reality as actually being 'in the field'.

It is crucial to realise that research is part of the world that it studies (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007), and this is true on more than one level. The impossibility of removing oneself from the process of research seems obvious on paper, but our actual experience brought about many thoughts. On one hand, there was the reality of the Missionaries reacting to us. Elder Jacobs and Elder Mac could not simply ignore us as if we were benches or trees – we were human beings who must be interacted with. The presence of our physical selves influenced their reactions to us, for example in Elder Jacobs' comment that he was acting differently than he normally would, or in the fact that they stayed much longer in one area than usual. Our inexperience certainly worked to shape how the fieldwork played out, but there is more to the self than simply being in a place.

In Scheper-Hughes' (2000) article discussing reactions to her controversial book about madness in Ireland, she emphasises how the ethnographer's own feelings will shape and impact

their work. Furthermore, she goes against Devereux's idea that all bias and subjectivity can be erased, arguing instead that perceptions are always filtered through what you know, and therefore through *who you are* (Scheper-Hughes, 2000). This is the key factor that became clear in the process of fieldwork, and I believe only *could* be made clear in this real-world context, with the classroom being, to varying degrees, isolated from what it teaches. My position as a Lutheran Christian, and past experiences dealing with people being aggressive towards religion shaped how I felt and presented myself, but also how I interpreted events. It coloured how I thought they would react to things. For example, when Elder Jacobs brought up the verbal attacks on their faith I was quick to try to relate this to my own experiences in high school, perhaps so that he would feel that I understood him and was not just another member of mainstream religio-aggressive society, as I had come to understand it. In a later discussion with my group member, I was considering Elder Jacobs' apparent 'division' of his world into the Biblical and the 'real', since that is something I myself have grown accustomed to doing. Outwardly, I divide my 'religious world' and my 'societal world' depending on who I am with; in the 'academic world', into which this reflection fits, I tend to shy away from speaking of my own religion. Even writing this now I feel apprehensive about possible conclusions that might be drawn about me. Of course, my own experiences may in fact be blocking me from understanding Elder Jacobs' perspective, and I should have been more wary of applying my own experiences to others. But then again, I would not find any lecture on how to deal with conflicts of religion, because religion, of course, is a subjective thing that anthropologists study, not have.

Here is where a series of questions began popping into my mind. Academia, I have been ex/implicitly taught since a young age, is an objective, scientific, secular institution. In our lectures, anthropology has taken issue with such things as objectivity and 'scientific' procedures in a way that brings up great questions, but there has been no mention of *anthropologist's* religions. This came into my mind as I was standing in Middle Meadow Walk, and I realised that my own religion was influencing the way I thought about the situation. I took the idea further and wondered what would happen if I were to be absolutely crazy and start talking about God in my reflections. Should I give the academic mindset precedence? Should I once again hide my own realities of truth? I wondered why the thought of speaking of my own faith academically bothered me so much. By ignoring my own realities, am I not simply perpetuating a neo-colonial discourse where 'Euro-American-scientific culture', as a blanket concept, becomes some standard for how the world should be, and on the basis of

which interpretations should be made? If I were, perhaps, to take *myself* seriously, what would happen? What kind of ethnography would begin to take shape and what new questions would be asked? While the project at hand – seeing how Middle Meadow Walk was being experienced spatially– seemed to have nothing to do with questions of my own faith, such issues were clearly on my mind. If I reflect on my position in order to recognise and filter out bias, why is it that only the secular remains? This is the way in which I understand what Scheper-Hughes (2000) meant when she spoke about not being able to remove the *self* from the fieldwork. We all understand the world through the lens created via our experiences and truths, why then are secular interpretations repeatedly the only ones deemed legitimate? I think the main issue lies in the assumption of neutrality. It is not that the secular perspective is necessarily wrong to use, indeed I see many benefits in it as a methodological tool that most understand, but in assuming that it is a blank slate, issues may arise. It is always important to apply a critical lens to your own standpoint, but assumptions may be easier to miss if academic institutions, and most people within them, agree with you.

These conclusions may seem far removed from a walk with Missionaries in the Meadows, but they are some of the things that became very real when confronted with actual fieldwork outside of the classroom for the first time. This extrapolation of thoughts may become interesting to explore in the future. How much richer might our understandings of the world be if we let ourselves be taken seriously, and bring new and different concepts of truth not just into our ethnographies, but make them the very *base* of our research? How, for example, would an ethnography based on Hindu pantheon of gods/goddesses, examining a Christian concept of trinity look? Or an ethnography based on animism, examining state-run environmental programs? Perhaps we should open up for this mosaic of ethnographies, a mosaic which may help us more deeply understand and take seriously other people. Indeed, is this perhaps where true decolonisation lies?

**References**

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